

LOST ALLEY
OF
ISKANDER
ROBERT E. HOWARD



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THE LOST VALLEY OF ISKANDER

By Robert E. Howard

In Francis Xavier Gordon, the creator of Conan the Barbarian, Dennis Dorgan, Kull, Sailor Steve Costigan and Breckenridge Elkins has produced one of his most colorful and unforgettable characters of fiction.

Francis X. Gordon is an American adventurer from Texas transplanted to Afghanistan and other mysterious and remote areas. His uncanny ability with the gun, the knife, and the sword help earn for him the legendary title, El Borak.

In this book will be found three novels about this great fighting Irishman: "The Daughter of Erlik Khan," "Hawk of the Hills" and "The Lost Valley of Iskander." This last title was originally titled "Swords of the Hills" and was discovered long after Howard's death as an unpublished manuscript. All of these novels appear for the first time in book form in this volume.

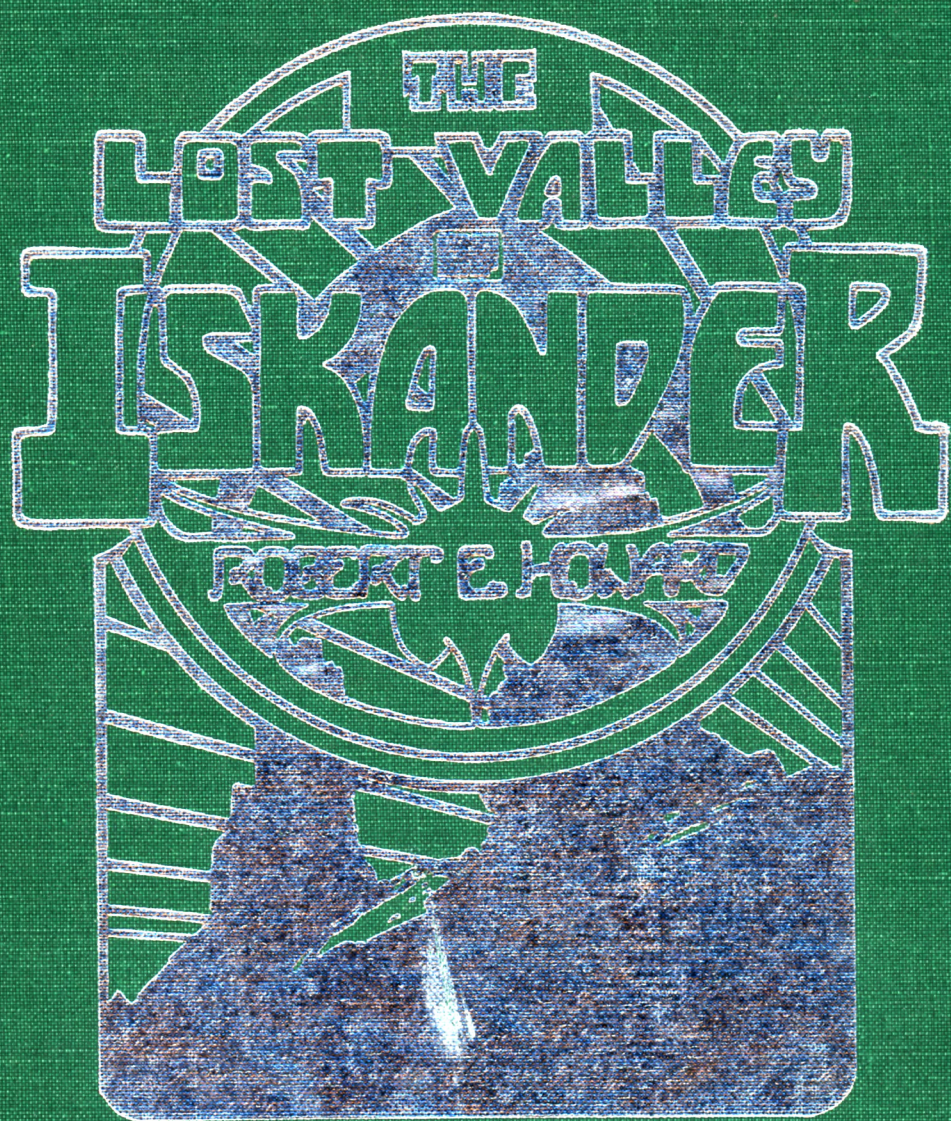
Howard described Francis X. Gordon in one of his novels as "Compactly built, with sun-darkened skin, wearing Afghan garments. His hair was straight and black as an Indian's, and his eyes are as black as his hair. His name was woven in the tales told in all the *caravanserais* and *bazaars* from Teheran to Bombay."

Years spent in the Middle East and the Orient had given Gordon the ability to pass himself for a native anywhere.

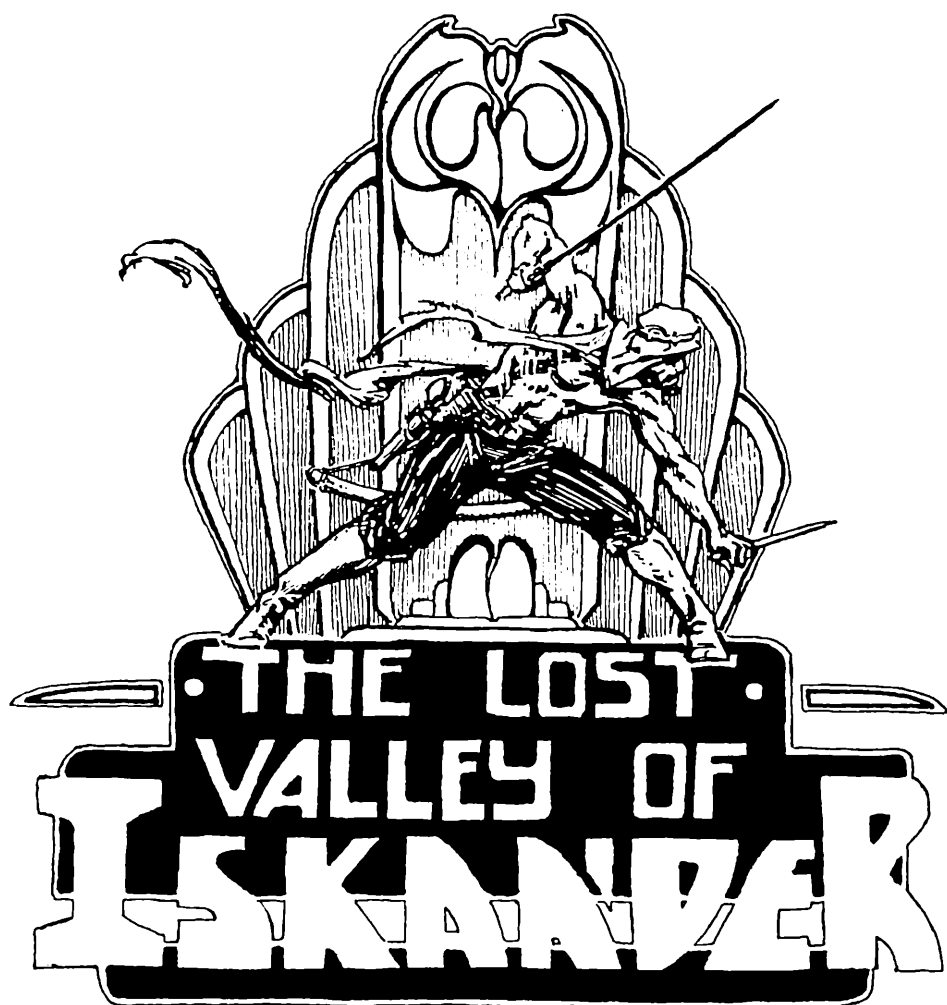
Some of Howard's very best writing is found in the Francis X. Gordon series. FAX Collector's Editions considers it an honor to bring these stories for the first time to the great audience of Howard fans and collectors.

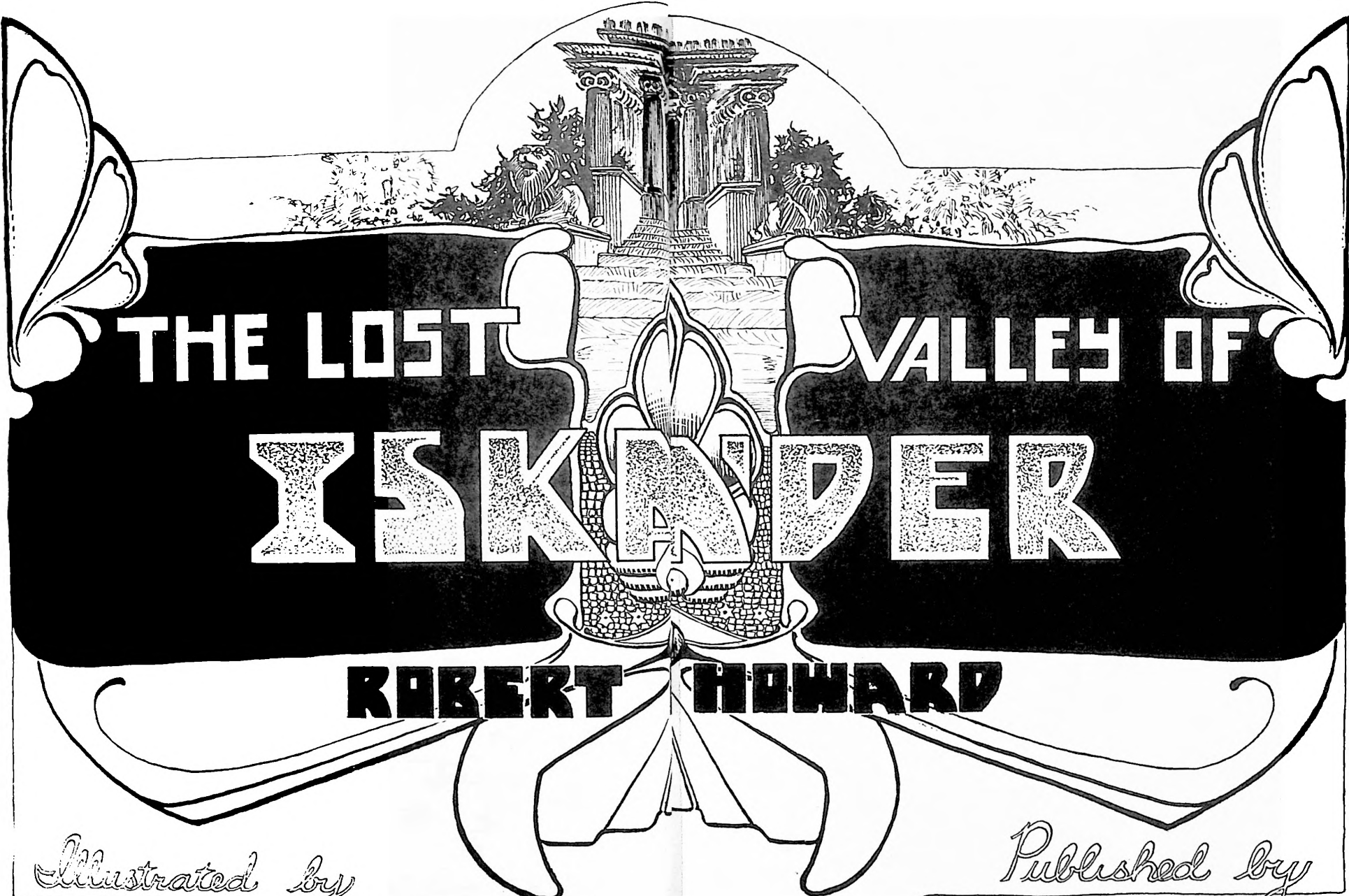
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THE LOST VALLEY OF ISKANDER

ROBERT HOWARD

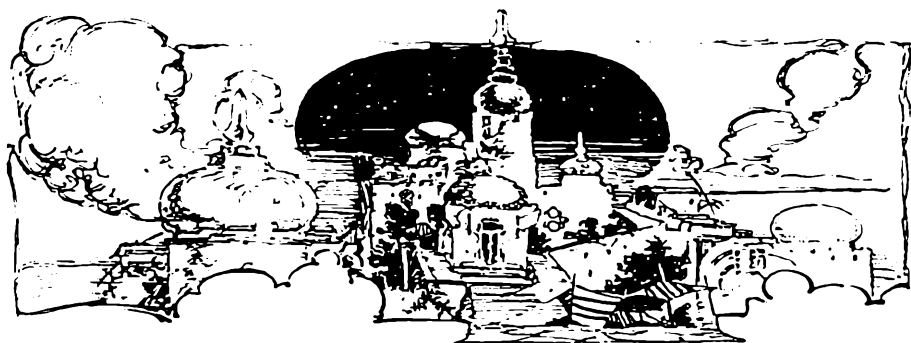
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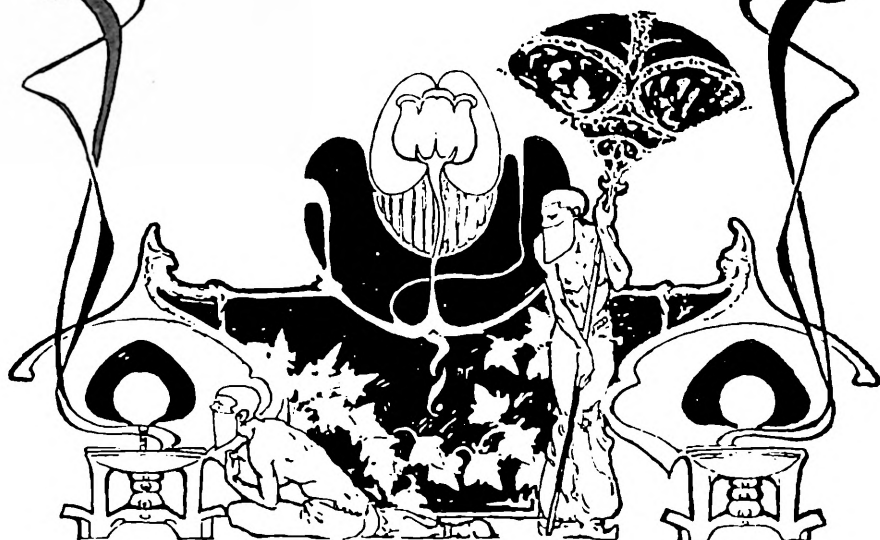
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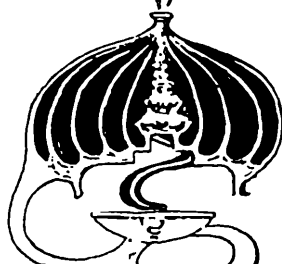
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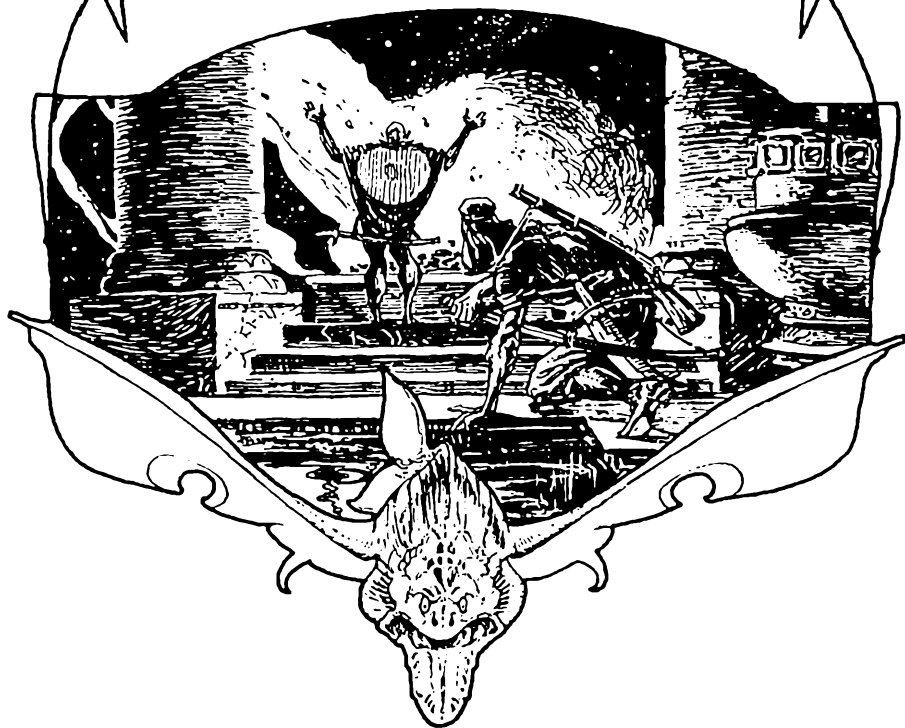


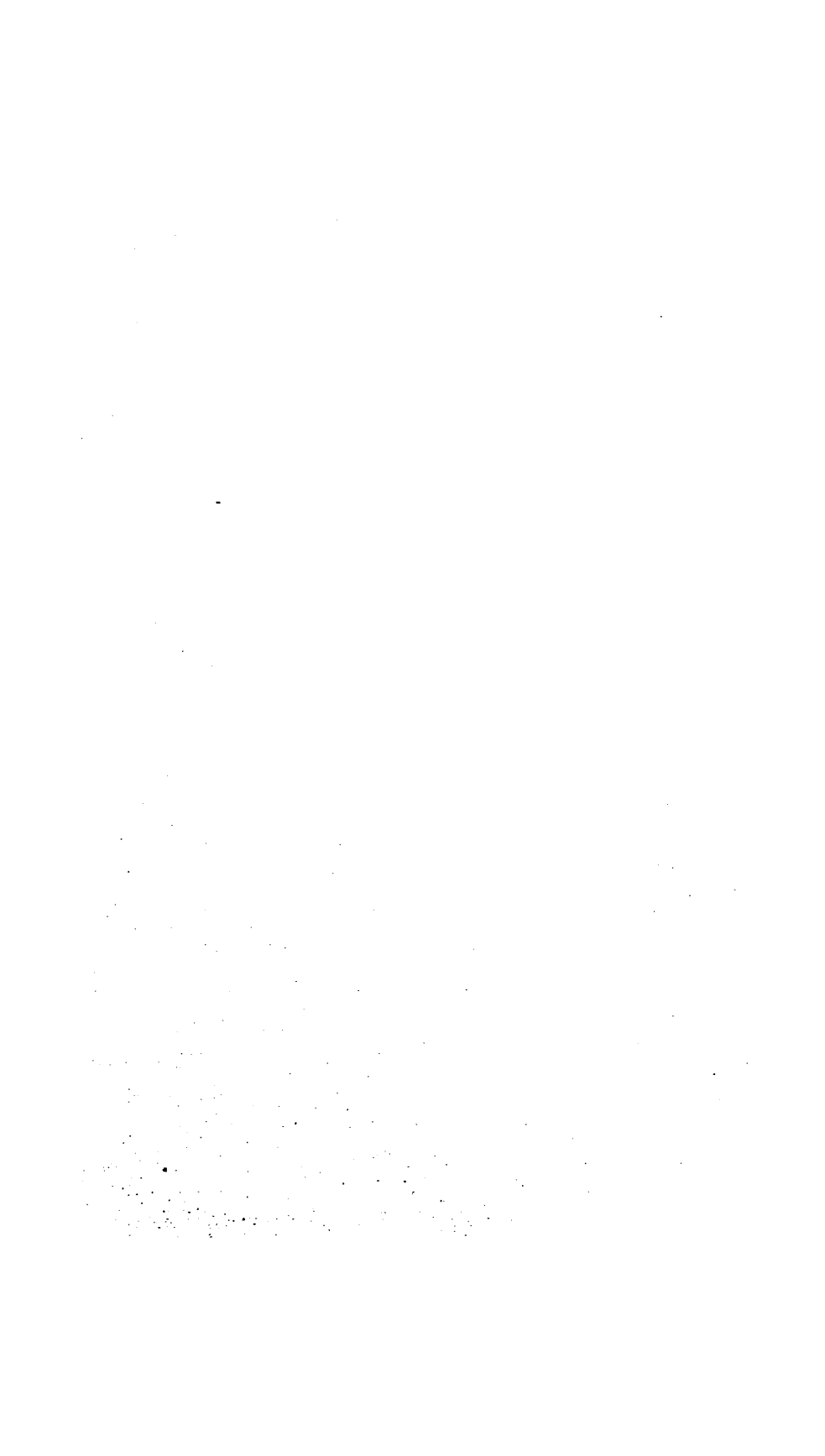
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INTRODUCTION

ONE of the most unforgettable characters created by the late Robert E. Howard was an Irish adventurer whom he named Francis Xavier Gordon. Though patterned to some extent after Lawrence of Arabia, Gordon was a much larger and stronger man and was a fighter *par excellence*.

Howard wrote that "Francis Xavier Gordon was known by repute from Stamboul to the China Sea. The Mohammedans called him El Borak, the Swift, and they feared and respected him. Years spent in the Orient had given him the ability to pass himself for a native anywhere."

Little tidbits of information about Gordon appear from time to time in the stories. For example, we are told in one novel that "Long odds never balked Francis X. Gordon, once of El Paso, Texas, and now for years soldier of fortune in the outlands of the world." We learn in another novel that his swiftness with guns, and his uncanny accuracy with them, came from his years as a western gunman before he took off for the far corners of the world.

Only five novels about Francis X. Gordon were published and two of these saw print the year of Howard's death. They were published during the years 1934 to 1936 and in three different magazines, TOP NOTCH, COMPLETE STORIES, and THRILLING ADVENTURES.

One unpublished manuscript of a Francis X. Gordon novel and one incomplete story about Gordon were discovered long after Howard's death. The Gordon stories were gaining in popularity about this time. There is little doubt that Howard would have written more stories about Gordon had not fate ruled otherwise.

The Gordon stories could well have been written by either Talbot Mundy or Harold Lamb. Incidentally, these two great writers of oriental adventure were favorites of Howard. He read their stories in ADVENTURE and other magazines with great interest.

"The Daughter of Erlik Khan" was the first Francis X. Gordon novel to be published, appearing

in the December 1934 issue of TOP NOTCH. The setting of the story is a remote area in the mountains of Afghanistan. Gordon leads an expedition to find a lost friend of Ormond, the Englishman. But there never was a lost friend, and Gordon eventually discovers the motives of the treacherous Ormond. They end up in the fabled forbidden city of Yolgan. And there, Gordon finds an old friend, the beautiful Yasmeena. Eventually, the secret of Mount Erlik Khan is revealed and Ormond gets what he deserved—death at the sword point of El Borak.

“Hawk of the Hills” was published in the June 1935 issue of TOP NOTCH, and again the setting is Afghanistan. However, the editor of TOP NOTCH wrote in his blurb under the novel title: “Gordon of Arabia finds new cause for warfare in the rank treason hidden behind the council of peace!” This is the only time so far as I know that our hero was called “Gordon of Arabia.”

The story begins with treachery, when Afdal Khan, chief of the Khoruk Orakzai, plots to kill his neighbors, the Afridis and their *feringhi* friend, Gordon. This is only one act in a drama of high intrigue which involves the British, the Persians, and the Russians. But Gordon is also involved, and his methods of diplomacy, though not approved by the Englishman, Willoughby, are eventually effective. The account of Gordon’s final duel with Afdal Khan is one of the most exciting to be found in or out of pulp fiction. It is Gordon’s almost superhuman ability with the tulwar, a heavy, curved Himalayan blade, which makes the difference.

“The Lost Valley of Iskander” was an unpublished manuscript, found many years after Howard’s death. The original title was “Swords of the Hills.” It is published in this book for the very first time.

This is the story of a lost race, descendants of Alexander the Great's soldiers, living in a hidden valley for many centuries.

Gordon befriends Bardylis of Attalus and thus earns the friendship of the Sons of Iskander. This helps him to retain the oiled silk package containing vital diplomatic secrets, and bring about the downfall of the Hungarian, Hunyadi. This is one of the best and most fantastic of all the stories in the Francis X. Gordon series.

The other adventures of El Borak are published under the title, *Son of the White Wolf*, a sequel to this book.

—Darrell C. Richardson







THE TALL Englishman, Pembroke, was scratching lines on the earth with his hunting knife, talking in a jerky tone that indicated suppressed excitement: "I tell you, Ormond, that peak to the west is the one we were to look for. Here, I've marked a map in the dirt. This mark here represents our camp, and this one is the peak. We've marched north far enough. At this spot we should turn westward—"

"Shut up!" muttered Ormond. "Rub out that map. Here comes Gordon."

Pembroke obliterated the faint lines with a quick sweep of his open hand, and as he scrambled up he managed to shuffle his feet across the spot. He and Ormond were laughing and talking easily as the third man of the expedition came up.

Gordon was shorter than his companions, but his physique did not suffer by comparison with either the rangy Pembroke or the more closely knit Ormond. He was one of those rare individuals at once lithe and com-

pact. His strength did not give the impression of being locked up within himself as is the case with so many strong men. He moved with a flowing ease that advertised power more subtly than does mere beefy bulk.

Though he was clad much like the two Englishmen except for an Arab headdress, he fitted into the scene as they did not. He, an American, seemed almost as much a part of these rugged uplands as the wild nomads which pasture their sheep along the slopes of the Hindu Kush. There was a certitude in his level gaze, an economy of motion in his movements, that reflected kinship with the wilderness.

"Pembroke and I were discussing that peak, Gordon," said Ormond, indicating the mountain under discussion, which reared a snow cap in the clear afternoon sky beyond a range of blue hills, hazy with distance. "We were wondering if it had a name."

"Everything in these hills has a name," Gordon answered. "Some of them don't appear on the maps, though. That peak is called Mount Erlik Khan. Less than a dozen white men have seen it."

"Never heard of it," was Pembroke's comment. "If we weren't in such a hurry to find poor old Reynolds, it might be fun having a closer look at it, what?"

"If getting your belly ripped open can be called fun," returned Gordon. "Erlik Khan's in Black Kirghiz country."

"Kirghiz? Heathens and devil worshipers? Sacred city of Yogan and all that rot."

"No rot about the devil worship," Gordon returned. "We're almost on the borders of their country now. This is a sort of no man's land here, squabbled over by the Kirghiz and Moslem nomads from farther east. We've been lucky not to have met any of the former. They're an isolated branch off the main stalk which centers about Issik-kul, and they hate white men like poison."

"This is the closest point we approach their country. From now on, as we travel north, we'll be swinging away from it. In another week, at most, we ought to be in the territory of the Uzbek tribe who you think captured your friend."

"I hope the old boy is still alive." Pembroke sighed.

"When you engaged me at Peshawar I told you I feared it was a futile quest," said Gordon. "If that tribe did capture your friend, the chances are all against his being still alive. I'm just warning you, so you won't be too disappointed if we don't find him."

"We appreciate that, old man," returned Ormond. "We knew no one but you could get us there with our heads still on our bally shoulders."

"We're not there yet," remarked Gordon cryptically, shifting his rifle under his arm. "I saw hangel sign before we went into camp, and I'm going to see if I can bag one. I may not be back before dark."

"Going afoot?" inquired Pembroke.

"Yes; if I get one I'll bring back a haunch for supper."

And with no further comment Gordon strode off down the rolling slope, while the other men stared silently after him.

He seemed to melt rather than stride into the broad copse at the foot of the slope. The men turned, still unspeaking, and glanced at the servants going about their duties in the camp—four stolid Pathans and a slender Punjabi Moslem who was Gordon's personal servant.

THE CAMP with its faded tents and tethered horses was the one spot of sentient life in a scene so vast and broodingly silent that it was almost daunting. To the south, stretched an unbroken rampart of hills climbing up to snowy peaks. Far to the north rose another more broken range.

Between those barriers lay a great expanse of rolling table-land, broken by solitary peaks and lesser hill ranges, and dotted thickly with copses of ash, birch, and larch. Now, in the beginning of the short summer, the slopes were covered with tall lush grass. But here no herds were watched by turbaned nomads and that giant peak far to the southwest seemed somehow aware of that fact. It brooded like a somber sentinel of the unknown.

"Come into my tent!"

Pembroke turned away quickly, motioning Ormond to follow. Neither of them noticed the burning intensity with which the Punjabi Ahmed stared after them. In the tent, the men sitting facing each other across a small folding table, Pembroke took pencil and paper and began tracing a duplicate of the map he had scratched in the dirt.

"'Reynolds' has served his purpose, and so has Gordon," he said. "It was a big risk bringing him, but he was the only man who could get us safely through Afghanistan. The weight that American carries with the Mohammedans is amazing. But it doesn't carry with the Kirghiz, and beyond this point we don't need him."

"That's the peak the Tajik described, right enough, and he gave it the same name Gordon called it. Using it as a guide, we can't miss Yolgan. We head due west, bearing a little to the north of Mount Erlik Khan. We don't need Gordon's guidance from now on, and we won't need him going back, because we're returning by the way of Kashmir, and we'll have a better safe-conduct even than he. Question now is, how are we going to get rid of him?"

"That's easy," snapped Ormond; he was the harder-framed, the more decisive, of the two. "We'll simply pick a quarrel with him and refuse to continue in his company. He'll tell us to go to the devil, take his con-

founded Punjabi, and head back for Kabul—or maybe some other wilderness. He spends most of his time wandering around through countries that are taboo to most white men.”

“Good enough!” approved Pembroke. “We don’t want to fight him. He’s too infernally quick with a gun. The Afghans call him ‘El Borak,’ the Swift. I had something of the sort in mind when I cooked up an excuse to halt here in the middle of the afternoon. I recognized that peak, you see. We’ll let him think we’re going on to the Uzbeks, alone, because, naturally, we don’t want him to know we’re going to Yolgan—”

“What’s that?” snapped Ormond suddenly, his hand closing on his pistol butt.

In that instant, when his eyes narrowed and his nostrils expanded, he looked almost like another man, as if suspicion disclosed his true—and sinister—nature.

“Go on talking,” he muttered. “Somebody’s listening outside the tent.”

Pembroke obeyed, and Ormond, noiselessly pushing back his camp chair, plunged suddenly out of the tent and fell on some one with a snarl of gratification. An instant later he reentered, dragging the Punjabi, Ahmed, with him. The slender Indian writhed vainly in the Englishman’s iron grip.

“This rat was eavesdropping,” Ormond snarled.

“Now he’ll spill everything to Gordon and there’ll be a fight, sure!” The prospect seemed to agitate Pembroke considerably. “What’ll we do now? What are you going to do?”

Ormond laughed savagely. “I haven’t come this far to risk getting a bullet in my guts and losing everything. I’ve killed men for less than this.”

Pembroke cried out an involuntary protest as Ormond’s hand dipped and the blue-gleaming gun came up. Ahmed screamed, and his cry was drowned in the roar of the shot.

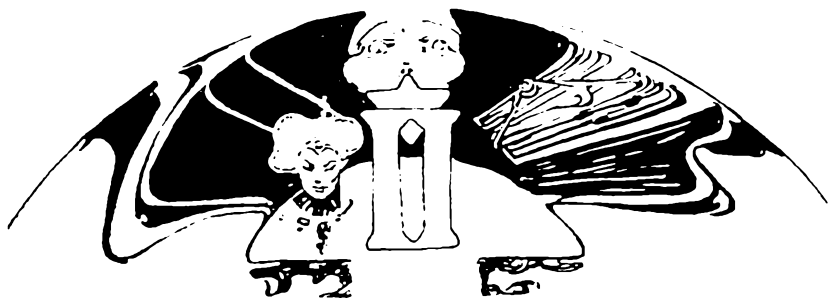
"Now we'll *have* to kill Gordon!"

Pembroke wiped his brow with a hand that shook a trifle. Outside rose a sudden mutter of Pashto as the Pathan servants crowded toward the tent.

"He's played into our hands!" rapped Ormond, shoving the still smoking gun back into his holster. With his booted toe he stirred the motionless body at his feet as casually as if it had been that of a snake. "He's out on foot, with only a handful of cartridges. It's just as well this turned out as it did."

"What do you mean?" Pembroke's wits seemed momentarily muddled.

"We'll simply pack up and clear out. Let him try to follow us on foot, if he wants to. There are limits to the abilities of every man. Left in these mountains on foot, without food, blankets, or ammunition, I don't think any white man will ever see Francis Xavier Gordon alive again."



WHEN Gordon left the camp he did not look behind him. Any thoughts of treachery on the part of his companions was furthest from his mind. He had no reason to suppose that they were anything except what they had represented themselves to be—white men taking a long chance to find a comrade the unmapped solitudes had swallowed up.

It was an hour or so after leaving the camp when, skirting the end of a grassy ridge, he sighted an antelope moving along the fringe of a thicket. The wind, such as there was, was blowing toward him, away from the animal. He began stalking it through the thicket, when a movement in the bushes behind him brought him around to the realization that he himself was being stalked.

He had a glimpse of a figure behind a clump of scrub, and then a bullet fanned his ear, and he fired at the flash and the puff of smoke. There was a thrashing among the foliage and then stillness. A moment later he was bending over a picturesquely clad form on the ground.

It was a lean, wiry man, young, with an ermine-edged *khilat*, a fur *calpack*, and silver-heeled boots. Sheathed knives were in his girdle, and a modern repeating rifle lay near his hand. He had been shot through the heart.

"Turkoman," muttered Gordon. "Bandit, from his looks, out on a lone scout. I wonder how far he's been trailing me."

He knew the presence of the man implied two things: somewhere in the vicinity there was a band of Turkomans; and somewhere, probably close by, there was a horse. A nomad never walked far, even when stalking a victim. He glanced up at the rise which rolled up from the copse. It was logical to believe that the Moslem had sighted him from the crest of the low ridge, had tied his horse on the other side, and glided down into the thicket to waylay him while he stalked the antelope.

Gordon went up the slope warily, though he did not believe there were any other tribesmen within earshot—else the reports of the rifles would have brought them to the spot—and found the horse without trouble. It was a Turkish stallion with a red leather saddle with

wide silver stirrups and a bridle heavy with goldwork. A scimitar hung from the saddle peak in an ornamented leather scabbard.

Swinging into the saddle, Gordon studied all quarters of the compass from the summit of the ridge. In the south a faint ribbon of smoke stood against the evening. His black eyes were keen as a hawk's; not many could have distinguished that filmy blue feather against the cerulean of the sky.

"Turkoman means bandits," he muttered. "Smoke means camp. They're trailing us, sure as fate."

Reining about, he headed for the camp. His hunt had carried him some miles east of the site, but he rode at a pace that ate up the distance. It was not yet twilight when he halted in the fringe of the larches and sat silently scanning the slope on which the camp had stood. It was bare. There was no sign of tents, men, or beasts.

His gaze sifted the surrounding ridges and clumps, but found nothing to rouse his alert suspicion. At last he walked his steed up the acclivity, carrying his rifle at the ready. He saw a smear of blood on the ground where he knew Pembroke's tent had stood, but there was no other sign of violence, and the grass was not trampled as it would have been by a charge of wild horsemen.

He read the evidence of a swift but orderly exodus. His companions had simply struck their tents, loaded the pack animals, and departed. But why? Sight of distant horsemen might have stampeded the white men, though neither had shown any sign of the white feather before; but certainly Ahmed would not have deserted his master and friend.

As he traced the course of the horses through the grass, his puzzlement increased; they had gone westward.

Their avowed destination lay beyond those moun-

tains in the north. They knew that, as well as he. But there was no mistake about it. For some reason, shortly after he had left camp, as he read the signs, they had packed hurriedly and set off westward, toward the forbidden country identified by Mount Erlik.

Thinking that possibly they had a logical reason for shifting camp and had left him a note of some kind which he had failed to find, Gordon rode back to the camp site and began casting about it in an ever-widening circle, studying the ground. And presently he saw sure signs that a heavy body had been dragged through the grass.

Men and horses had almost obliterated the dim track, but for years Gordon's life had depended upon the keenness of his faculties. He remembered the smear of blood on the ground where Pembroke's tent had stood.

He followed the crushed grass down the south slope and into a thicket, and an instant later he was kneeling beside the body of a man. It was Ahmed, and at first glance Gordon thought he was dead. Then he saw that the Punjabi, though shot through the body and undoubtedly dying, still had a faint spark of life in him.

He lifted the turbaned head and set his canteen to the blue lips. Ahmed groaned, and into his glazed eyes came intelligence and recognition.

"Who did this, Ahmed?" Gordon's voice grated with the suppression of his emotions.

"Ormond Sahib," gasped the Punjabi. "I listened outside their tent, because I feared they planned treachery to you. I never trusted them. So they shot me and have gone away, leaving you to die alone in the hills."

"But why?" Gordon was more mystified than ever.

"They go to Yolgan," panted Ahmed. "The Reynolds Sahib we sought never existed. He was a lie they created to hoodwink you."

"Why to Yolgan?" asked Gordon.

But Ahmed's eyes dilated with the imminence of death; in a racking convulsion he heaved up in Gordon's arms; then blood gushed from his lips and he died.

GORDON rose, mechanically dusting his hands. Immobile as the deserts he haunted, he was not prone to display his emotions. Now he merely went about heaping stones over the body to make a cairn that wolves and jackals could not tear into. Ahmed had been his companion on many a dim road; less servant than friend.

But when he had lifted the last stone, Gordon climbed into the saddle, and without a backward glance he rode westward. He was alone in a savage country, without food or proper equipage. Chance had given him a horse, and years of wandering on the raw edges of the world had given him experience and a greater familiarity with this unknown land than any other white man he knew. It was conceivable that he might live to win his way through to some civilized outpost.

But he did not even give that possibility a thought. Gordon's ideas of obligation, of debt and payment, were as direct and primitive as those of the barbarians among whom his lot had been cast for so many years. Ahmed had been his friend and had died in his service. Blood must pay for blood.

That was as certain in Gordon's mind as hunger is certain in the mind of a gray timber wolf. He did not know why the killers were going toward forbidden Yolgan, and he did not greatly care. His task was to follow them to hell if necessary and exact full payment for spilled blood. No other course suggested itself.

Darkness fell and the stars came out, but he did not slacken his pace. Even by starlight it was not hard to follow the trail of the caravan through the high grass. The Turkish horse proved a good one and fairly fresh.

He felt certain of overtaking the laden pack ponies, in spite of their long start.

As the hours passed, however, he decided that the Englishmen were determined to push on all night. They evidently meant to put so much distance between them and himself that he could never catch them, following on foot as they thought him to be. But why were they so anxious to keep from him the truth of their destination?

A sudden thought made his face grim, and after that he pushed his mount a bit harder. His hand instinctively sought the hilt of the broad scimitar slung from the high-peaked horn.

His gaze sought the white cap of Mount Erlik, ghostly in the starlight, then swung to the point where he knew Yolgan lay. He had been there before, himself, had heard the deep roar of the long bronze trumpets that shaven-headed priests blow from the mountains at sunrise.

It was past midnight when he sighted fires near the willow-massed banks of a stream. At first glance he knew it was not the camp of the men he followed. The fires were too many. It was an *ordu* of the nomadic Kirghiz who roam the country between Mount Erlik Khan and the loose boundaries of the Mohammedan tribes. This camp lay full in the path of Yolgan and he wondered if the Englishmen had known enough to avoid it. These fierce people hated strangers. He himself, when he visited Yolgan, had accomplished the feat disguised as a native.

Gaining the stream above the camp he moved closer, in the shelter of the willows, until he could make out the dim shapes of sentries on horseback in the light of the small fires. And he saw something else—three white European tents inside the ring of round, gray felt *kibitkas*. He swore silently; if the Black Kirghiz had killed the white men, appropriating their be-

longings, it meant the end of his vengeance. He moved nearer.

It was a suspicious, slinking, wolf-like dog that betrayed him. Its frenzied clamor brought men swarming out of the felt tents, and a swarm of mounted sentinels raced toward the spot, stringing bows as they came.

Gordon had no wish to be filled with arrows as he ran. He spurred out of the willows and was among the horsemen before they were aware of him, slashing silently right and left with the Turkish scimitar. Blades swung around him, but the men were more confused than he. He felt his edge grate against steel and glance down to split a broad skull; then he was through the cordon and racing into deeper darkness while the demoralized pack howled behind him.

A familiar voice shouting above the clamor told him that Ormond, at least, was not dead. He glanced back to see a tall figure cross the firelight and recognized Pembroke's rangy frame. The fire gleamed on steel in his hands. That they were armed showed they were not prisoners, though this forbearance on the part of the fierce nomads was more than his store of Eastern lore could explain.

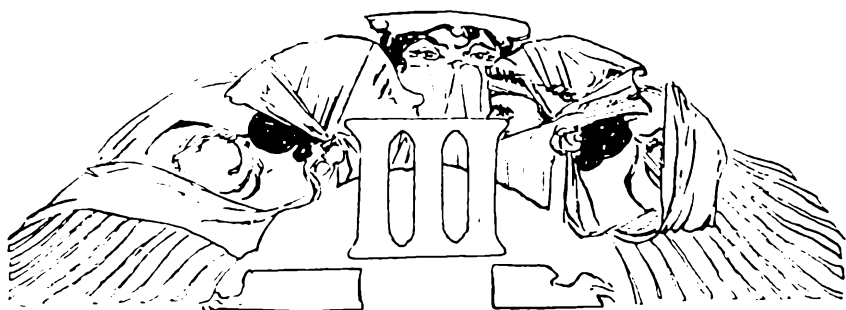
The pursuers did not follow him far; drawing in under the shadows of a thicket he heard them shouting gutturally to each other as they rode back to the tent. There would be no more sleep in that *ordu* that night. Men with naked steel in their hands would pace their horses about the encampment until dawn. It would be difficult to steal back for a long shot at his enemies. But now, before he slew them, he wished to learn what took them to Yolgan.

Absently his hand caressed the hawk-headed pommel of the Turkoman scimitar. Then he turned again eastward and rode back along the route he had come, as fast as he could push the wearying horse. It was not

yet dawn when he came upon what he had hoped to find—a second camp, some ten miles west of the spot where Ahmed had been killed; dying fires reflected on one small tent and on the forms of men wrapped in cloaks on the ground.

He did not approach too near; when he could make out the lines of slowly moving shapes that were picketed horses and could see other shapes that were riders pacing about the camp, he drew back behind a thicketed ridge, dismounted and unsaddled his horse.

While it eagerly cropped the fresh grass, he sat cross-legged with his back to a tree trunk, his rifle across his knees, as motionless as an image and as imbued with the vast patience of the East as the eternal hills themselves.



DAWN was little more than a hint of grayness in the sky when the camp that Gordon watched was astir. Smoldering coals leaped up into flames again, and the scent of mutton stew filled the air. Wiry men in caps of Astrakhan fur and girdled *caftans* swaggered among the horse lines or squatted beside the cooking pots, questing after savory morsels with unwashed fingers. There were no women among them and scant luggage. The lightness with which they traveled could mean only one thing.

The sun was not yet up when they began saddling

horses and belting on weapons. Gordon chose that moment to appear, riding leisurely down the ridge toward them.

A yell went up, and instantly a score of rifles covered him. The very boldness of his action stayed their fingers on the triggers. Gordon wasted no time, though he did not appear hurried. Their chief had already mounted, and Gordon reined up almost beside him. The Turkoman glared—a hawk-nosed, evil-eyed ruffian with a henna-stained beard. Recognition grew like a red flame in his eyes, and, seeing this, his warriors made no move.

“Yusef Khan,” said Gordon, “you Sunnite dog, have I found you at last?”

Yusef Khan plucked his red beard and snarled like a wolf. “Are you mad, El Borak?”

“It is El Borak!” rose an excited murmur from the warriors, and that gained Gordon another respite.

They crowded closer, their blood lust for the instant conquered by their curiosity. El Borak was a name known from Istanbul to Bhutan and repeated in a hundred wild tales wherever the wolves of the desert gathered.

As for Yusef Khan, he was puzzled, and furtively eyed the slope down which Gordon had ridden. He feared the white man’s cunning almost as much as he hated him, and in his suspicion, hate and fear that he was in a trap, the Turkoman was as dangerous and uncertain as a wounded cobra.

“What do you here?” he demanded. “Speak quickly, before my warriors strip the skin from you a little at a time.”

“I came following an old feud.” Gordon had come down the ridge with no set plan, but he was not surprised to find a personal enemy leading the Turkomans. It was no unusual coincidence. Gordon had blood-foes scattered all over Central Asia.

“You are a fool—”

In the midst of the chief's sentence Gordon leaned from his saddle and struck Yusef Khan across the face with his open hand. The blow cracked like a bull whip and Yusef reeled, almost losing his seat. He howled like a wolf and clawed at his girdle, so muddled with fury that he hesitated between knife and pistol. Gordon could have shot him down while he fumbled, but that was not the American's plan.

“Keep off!” he warned the warriors, yet not reaching for a weapon. “I have no quarrel with you. This concerns only your chief and me.”

With another man that would have had no effect; but another man would have been dead already. Even the wildest tribesman had a vague feeling that the rules governing action against ordinary *feringhi* did not apply to El Borak.

“Take him!” howled Yusef Khan. “He shall be flayed alive!”

They moved forward at that, and Gordon laughed unpleasantly.

“Torture will not wipe out the shame I have put upon your chief,” he taunted. “Men will say ye are led by a khan who bears the mark of El Borak's hand in his beard. How is such shame to be wiped out? Lo, he calls on his warriors to avenge him! Is Yusef Khan a coward?”

They hesitated again and looked at their chief whose beard was clotted with foam. They all knew that to wipe out such an insult the aggressor must be slain by the victim in single combat. In that wolf pack even a suspicion of cowardice was tantamount to a death sentence.

If Yusef Khan failed to accept Gordon's challenge, his men might obey him and torture the American to death at his pleasure, but they would not forget, and from that moment he was doomed.

Yusef Khan knew this; knew that Gordon had tricked him into a personal duel, but he was too drunk with fury to care. His eyes were red as those of a rabid wolf, and he had forgotten his suspicions that Gordon had riflemen hidden up on the ridge. He had forgotten everything except his frenzied passion to wipe out forever the glitter in those savage black eyes that mocked him.

"Dog!" he screamed, ripping out his broad scimitar. "Die at the hands of a chief!"

He came like a typhoon, his cloak whipping out in the wind behind him, his scimitar flaming above his head. Gordon met him in the center of the space the warriors left suddenly clear.

YUSEF KHAN rode a magnificent horse as if it were part of him, and it was fresh. But Gordon's mount had rested, and it was well-trained in the game of war. Both horses responded instantly to the will of their riders.

The fighters revolved about each other in swift curvets and gambados, their blades flashing and grating without the slightest pause, turned red by the rising sun. It was less like two men fighting on horseback than like a pair of centaurs, half man and half beast, striking for one another's life.

"Dog!" panted Yusef Khan, hacking and hewing like a man possessed of devils. "I'll nail your head to my tent pole—ahhhh!"

Not a dozen of the hundred men watching saw the stroke, except as a dazzling flash of steel before their eyes, but all heard its crunching impact. Yusef Khan's charger screamed and reared, throwing a dead man from the saddle with a split skull.

A wordless wolfish yell that was neither anger nor applause went up, and Gordon wheeled, whirling his

scimitar about his head so that the red drops flew in a shower.

"Yusef Khan is dead!" he roared. "Is there one to take up his quarrel?"

They gaped at him, not sure of his intention, and before they could recover from the surprise of seeing their invincible chief fall, Gordon thrust his scimitar back in its sheath with a certain air of finality and said:

"And now who will follow me to plunder greater than any of ye ever dreamed?"

That struck an instant spark, but their eagerness was qualified by suspicion.

"Show us!" demanded one. "Show us the plunder before we slay thee."

Without answering, Gordon swung off his horse and cast the reins to a mustached rider to hold, who was so astonished that he accepted the indignity without protest. Gordon strode over to a cooking pot, squatted beside it and began to eat ravenously. He had not tasted food in many hours.

"Shall I show you the stars by daylight?" he demanded, scooping out handfuls of stewed mutton. "Yet the stars are there, and men see them in the proper time. If I had the loot would I come asking you to share it? Neither of us can win it without the other's aid."

"He lies," said one whom his comrades addressed as Uzun Beg. "Let us slay him and continue to follow the caravan we have been tracking."

"Who will lead you?" asked Gordon pointedly.

They scowled at him, and various ruffians who considered themselves logical candidates glanced furtively at one another. Then all looked back at Gordon, unconcernedly wolfing down mutton stew five minutes after having slain the most dangerous swordsman of the black tents.

His attitude of indifference deceived nobody. They knew he was dangerous as a cobra that could strike like lightning in any direction. They knew they could not kill him so quickly that he would not kill some of them, and naturally none wanted to be first to die.

That alone would not have stopped them. But that was combined with curiosity, avarice roused by his mention of plunder, vague suspicion that he would not have put himself in a trap unless he held some sort of a winning hand, and jealousy of the leaders of each other.

Uzun Beg, who had been examining Gordon's mount, exclaimed angrily: "He rides Ali Khan's steed!"

"Aye," Gordon assented tranquilly. "Moreover this is Ali Khan's sword. He fired at me from ambush, so he lies dead."

There was no answer. There was no feeling in that wolf pack except fear and hate, and respect for courage, craft, and ferocity.

"Where would you lead us?" demanded one named Orkhan Shah, tacitly recognizing Gordon's dominance. "We be all free men and sons of the sword."

"Ye be all sons of dogs," answered Gordon. "Men without grazing lands or wives, outcasts, denied by thine own people—outlaws whose lives are forfeit, and who must roam in the naked mountains. You followed that dead dog without question. Now ye demand this and that of me!"

Then ensued a medley of argument among themselves, in which Gordon seemed to take no interest. All his attention was devoted to the cooking pot. His attitude was no pose; without swagger or conceit the man was so sure of himself that his bearing was no more self-conscious among a hundred cutthroats hovering on the hair line of murder than it would have been among friends.

Many eyes sought the gun butt at his hip. Men said his skill with the weapon was sorcery; an ordinary revolver became in his hand a living engine of destruction that was drawn and roaring death before a man could realize that Gordon's hand had moved.

"Men say thou hast never broken thy word," suggested Orkhan. "Swear to lead us to this plunder, and it may be we shall see."

"I swear no oaths," answered Gordon, rising and wiping his hands on a saddle cloth. "I have spoken. It is enough. Follow me, and many of you will die. Aye, the jackals will feed full. You will go up to the paradise of the prophet and your brothers will forget your names. But to those that live, wealth like the rain of Allah will fall upon them."

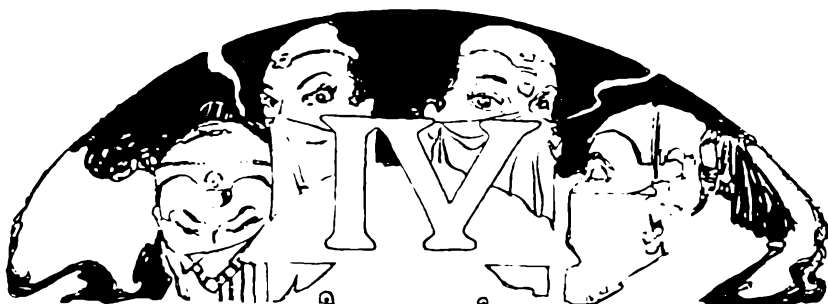
"Enough of words!" exclaimed one greedily. "Lead us to this rare loot."

"You dare not follow where I would lead," he answered. "It lies in the land of the Kara Kirghiz."

"We dare, by Allah!" they barked angrily. "We are already in the land of the Black Kirghiz, and we follow the caravan of some infidels, whom, *inshallah*, we shall send to hell before another sunrise."

Bismillah," said Gordon. "Many of you shall eat arrows and edged steel before our quest is over. But if you dare stake your lives against plunder richer than the treasures of Hind, come with me. We have far to ride."

A few minutes later the whole band was trotting westward. Gordon led, with lean riders on either hand; their attitude suggested that he was more prisoner than guide, but he was not perturbed. His confidence in his destiny had again been justified, and the fact that he had not the slightest idea of how to redeem his pledge concerning treasure disturbed him not at all. A way would be opened to him, somehow, and at present he did not even bother to consider it.



THE FACT that Gordon knew the country better than the Turkomans did aided him in his subtle policy to gain ascendancy over them. From giving suggestions to giving orders and being obeyed is a short step, when delicately taken.

He took care that they kept below the sky lines as much as possible. It was not easy to hide the progress of a hundred men from the alert nomads; but these roamed far and there was a chance that only the band he had seen were between him and Yogan.

But Gordon doubted this when they crossed a track that had been made since he rode eastward the night before. Many riders had passed that point, and Gordon urged greater speed, knowing that if they were spied by the Kirghiz instant pursuit was inevitable.

In the late afternoon they came in sight of the *ordu* beside the willow-lined stream. Horses tended by youngsters grazed near the camp, and farther away the riders watched the sheep which browsed through the tall grass.

Gordon had left all his men except half a dozen in a thicket-massed hollow behind the next ridge, and he now lay among a cluster of boulders on a slope overlooking the valley. The encampment was beneath him, distinct in every detail, and he frowned. There was no sign of the white tents. The Englishmen had been

there. They were not there now. Had their hosts turned on them at last, or had they continued alone toward Yolgan?

The Turkomans, who did not doubt that they were to attack and loot their hereditary enemies, began to grow impatient.

"Their fighting men are less than ours," suggested Uzun Beg, "and they are scattered, suspecting nothing. It is long since an enemy invaded the land of the Black Kirghiz. Send back for the others, and let us attack. You promised us plunder."

"Flat-faced women and fat-tailed sheep?" Gordon jeered.

"Some of the women are fair to look at," the Turkoman maintained. "And we could feast full on the sheep. But these dogs carry gold in their wagons to trade to merchants from Kashmir. It comes from Mount Erlik Khan."

Gordon remembered that he had heard tales of a gold mine in Mount Erlik before, and he had seen some crudely cast ingots the owners of which swore they had them from the Black Kirghiz. But gold did not interest him just then.

"That is a child's tale," he said, at least half believing what he said. "The plunder I will lead you to is real, would you throw it away for a dream? Go back to the others and bid them stay hidden. Presently I will return."

They were instantly suspicious, and he saw it.

"Return thou, Uzun Beg," he said, "and give the others my message. The rest of you come with me."

That quieted the hair-trigger suspicions of the five, but Uzun Beg grumbled in his beard as he strode back down the slope, mounted and rode eastward. Gordon and his companions likewise mounted behind the crest and, keeping below the sky line, they followed the ridge around as it slanted toward the southwest.

It ended in sheer cliffs, as if it had been sliced off with a knife, but dense thickets hid them from the sight of the camp as they crossed the space that lay between the cliffs and the next ridge, which ran to a bend in the stream, a mile below the *ordu*.

This ridge was considerably higher than the one they had left, and before they reached the point where it began to slope downward toward the river, Gordon crawled to the crest and scanned the camp again with a pair of binoculars that had once been the property of Yusef Khan.

The nomads showed no sign that they suspected the presence of enemies, and Gordon turned his glasses farther eastward, located the ridge beyond which his men were concealed, but saw no sign of them. But he did see something else.

Miles to the east a knife-edge ridge cut the sky, notched with a shallow pass. As he looked he saw a string of black dots moving through that notch. It was so far away that even the powerful glasses did not identify them, but he knew what the dots were—mounted men, many of them.

Hurrying back to his five Turkomans, he said nothing, but pressed on, and presently they emerged from behind the ridge and came upon the stream where it wound out of sight of the encampment. Here was the logical crossing for any road leading to Yolgan, and it was not long before he found what he sought.

In the mud at the edges of the stream were the prints of shod hoofs and at one spot the mark of a European boot. The Englishmen had crossed here; beyond the ford their trail lay west, across the rolling table-land.

GORDON was puzzled anew. He had supposed that there was some particular reason why this clan had received the Englishmen in peace. He had reasoned that

Ormond would persuade them to escort him to Yolgan. Though the clans made common cause against invaders, there were feuds among themselves, and the fact that one tribe received a man in peace did not mean that another tribe would not cut his throat.

Gordon had never heard of the nomads of this region showing friendship to any white man. Yet the Englishmen had passed the night in that *ordu* and now plunged boldly on as if confident of their reception. It looked like utter madness.

As he meditated, a distant sputter of rifle fire jerked his head up. He splashed across the stream and raced up the slope that hid them from the valley, with the Turkomans at his heels working the levers of their rifles. As he topped the slope he saw the scene below him crystal-etched in the blue evening.

The Turkomans were attacking the Kirghiz camp. They had crept up the ridge overlooking the valley, and then swept down like a whirlwind. The surprise had been almost, but not quite, complete. Outriding shepherds had been shot down and the flocks scattered, but the surviving nomads had made a stand within the ring of their tents and wagons.

Ancient matchlocks, bows, and a few modern rifles answered the fire of the Turkomans. These came on swiftly, shooting from the saddle, only to wheel and swerve out of close range again.

The Kirghiz were protected by their cover, but even so the hail of lead took toll. A few saddles were emptied, but the Turkomans were hard hit on their prancing horses, as the riders swung their bodies from side to side.

Gordon gave his horse the rein and came galloping across the valley, his scimitar glittering in his hand. With his enemies gone from the camp, there was no reason for attacking the Kirghiz now as he had planned.

But the distance was too great for shouted orders to be heard.

The Turkomans saw him coming, sword in hand, and mistook his meaning. They thought he meant to lead a charge, and in their zeal they anticipated him. They were aided by the panic which struck the Kirghiz as they saw Gordon and his five Turkomans sweep down the slope and construed it as an attack in force on their flank.

Instantly they directed all their fire at the newcomers, emptying the clumsy matchlocks long before Gordon was even within good rifle range. And as they did, the Turkomans charged home with a yell that shook the valley, preceded by a withering fire as they blazed away over their horses' ears.

This time no ragged volleys could stop them. In their panic the tribesmen had loosed all their firearms at once, and the charge caught them with matchlocks and muskets empty. A straggling rifle fire met the oncoming raiders and knocked a few out of their saddles, and a flight of arrows accounted for a few more, but then the charge burst on the makeshift barricade and crumpled it. The howling Turkomans rode their horses in among the tents, flailing right and left with scimitars already crimson.

For an instant hell raged in the *ordu*, then the demoralized nomads broke and fled as best they could, being cut down and trampled by the conquerors. Neither women nor children were spared by the blood-mad Turks. Such as could slipped out of the ring and ran wailing for the river. An instant later the riders were after them like wolves.

Yet, winged by the fear of death, a disorderly mob reached the shore first, broke through the willows and plunged screaming over the low bank, trampling each other in the water. Before the Turkomans could rein

their horses over the bank, Gordon arrived, with his horse plastered with sweat and snorting foam.

Enraged at the wanton slaughter, Gordon was an incarnation of berserk fury. He caught the first man's bridle and threw his horse back on its haunches with such violence that the beast lost its footing and fell, sprawling, throwing its rider. The next man sought to crowd past, giving tongue like a wolf, and him Gordon smote with the flat of his scimitar. Only the heavy fur cap saved the skull beneath, and the man pitched, senseless, from his saddle. The others yelled and reined back suddenly.

Gordon's wrath was like a dash of ice-cold water in their faces, shocking their blood-mad nerves into stinging sensibility. From among the tents cries still affronted the twilight, with the butcherlike chopping of merciless sword blows, but Gordon gave no heed. He could save no one in the plundered camp, where the howling warriors were ripping the tents to pieces, overturning the wagons and setting the torch in a hundred places.

More and more men with burning eyes and dripping blades were streaming toward the river, halting as they saw El Borak barring their way. There was not a ruffian there who looked half as formidable as Gordon did in that instant. His lips snarled and his eyes were black coals of hell's fire.

There was no play acting about it. His mask of immobility had fallen, revealing the sheer primordial ferocity of the soul beneath. The dazed Turkomans, still dizzy from the glutting of their blood lust, weary from striking great blows, and puzzled by his attitude, shrank back from him.

"Who gave the order to attack?" he yelled, and his voice was like the slash of a saber.

He trembled in the intensity of his passion. He was a blazing flame of fury and death, without control or

repression. He was as wild and brute-savage in that moment as the wildest barbarian in that raw land.

"Uzun Beg!" cried a score of voices, and men pointed at the scowling warrior. "He said that you had stolen away to betray us to the Kirghiz, and that we should attack before they had time to come upon us and surround us. We believed him until we saw you riding over the slope."

With a wordless fierce yell like the scream of a striking panther, Gordon hurled his horse like a typhoon on Uzun Beg, smiting with his scimitar. Uzun Beg catapulted from his saddle with his skull crushed, dead before he actually realized that he was menaced.

El Borak wheeled on the others and they reined back from him, scrambling in terror.

"Dogs! Jackals! Noseless apes! Forgotten of God!" he lashed them with words that burned like scorpions. "Sons of nameless curs! Did I not bid you keep hidden? Is my word wind—a leaf to be blown away by the breath of a dog like Uzun Beg? Now you have lapped up needless blood, and the whole countryside will be riding us down like jackals. Where is your loot? Where is the gold with which the wagons were laden?"

"There was no gold," muttered a tribesman, mopping blood from a sword cut.

They flinched from the savage scorn and anger in Gordon's baying laughter.

"Dogs that nuzzle in the dung heaps of hell! I should leave you to die."

"Slay him!" mouthed a tribesman. "Shall we eat of an infidel? Slay him and let us go back whence we came. There is no loot in this naked land."

THE PROPOSAL was not greeted with enthusiasm. Their rifles were all empty, some even discarded in the fury of sword strokes. They knew the rifle under El Borak's knee was loaded and the pistol at his hip. Nor

did any of them care to ride into the teeth of that reddened scimitar that swung like a live thing in his right hand.

Gordon saw their indecision and mocked them. He did not argue or reason as another man might have done. And if he had, they would have killed him. He beat down opposition with curses, abuses, and threats that were convincing because he meant every word he spat at them. They submitted because they were a wolf pack, and he was the grimmest wolf of them all.

Not one man in a thousand could have bearded them as he did and lived. But there was a driving elemental power about him that shook resolution and daunted anger—something of the fury of an unleashed torrent or a roaring wind that hammered down will power by sheer ferocity.

“We will have no more of thee,” the boldest voiced the last spark of rebellion. “Go thy ways, and we will go ours.”

Gordon barked a bitter laugh. “Thy ways lead to the fires of Jehannum!” he taunted bitterly. “Ye have spilled blood, and blood will be demanded in payment. Do you dream that those who have escaped will not flee to the nearest tribes and raise the countryside? You will have a thousand riders about your ears before dawn.”

“Let us ride eastward,” one said nervously. “We will be out of this land of devils before the alarm is raised.”

Again Gordon laughed and men shivered. “Fools! You cannot return. With the glasses I have seen a body of horsemen following our trail. Ye are caught in the fangs of the vise. Without me you cannot go onward; if you stand still or go back, none of you will see another sun set.”

Panic followed instantly which was more difficult to fight down than rebellion.

"Slay him!" howled one. "He has led us into a trap!"

"Fools!" cried Orkhan Shah, who was one of the five Gordon had led to the ford. "It was not he who tricked you into charging the Kirghiz. *He* would have led us on to the loot he promised. He knows this land and we do not. If ye slay him now, ye slay the only man who may save us!"

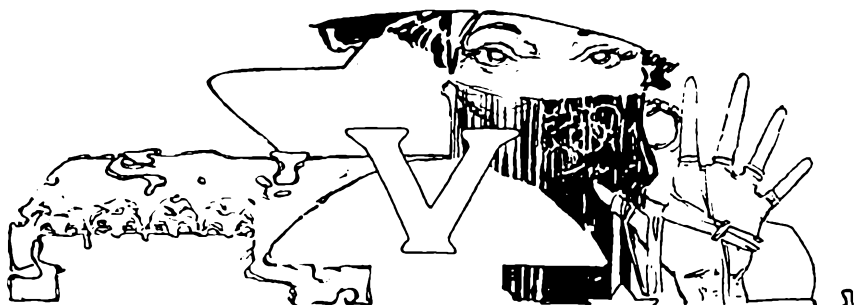
That spark caught instantly, and they clamored about Gordon.

"The wisdom of the sahibs is thine! We be dogs who eat dirt! Save us from our folly! Lo, we obey thee! Lead us out of this land of death, and show us the gold whereof thou spoked!"

Gordon sheathed his scimitar and took command without comment. He gave orders and they were obeyed. Once these wild men, in their fear, turned to him, they trusted him implicitly. They knew he was somehow using them ruthlessly in his own plans, but that was nothing more than any one of them would have done had he been able. In that wild land only the ways of the wolf pack prevailed.

As many Kirghiz horses as could be quickly caught were rounded up. On some of them food and articles of clothing from the looted camp were hastily tied. Half a dozen Turkomans had been killed, nearly a dozen wounded. The dead were left where they had fallen. The most badly wounded were tied to their saddles, and their groans made the night hideous. Darkness had fallen as the desperate band rode over the slope and plunged across the river. The wailing of the Kirghiz women, hidden in the thickets, was like the dirging of lost souls.





GORDON did not attempt to follow the trail of the Englishman over the comparatively level table-land. Yolgan was his destination and he believed he would find them there, but there was desperate need to escape the tribesmen who he was certain were following them, and who would be lashed to fiercer determination by what they would find in the camp by the river.

Instead of heading straight across the table-land, Gordon swung into the hills that bordered it on the south and began following them westward. Before midnight one of the wounded men died in his saddle, and some of the others were semidelirious. They hid the body in a crevice and went on. They moved through the darkness of the hills like ghosts; the only sounds were the clink of hoofs on stone and the groans of the wounded.

An hour before dawn they came to a stream which wound between limestone ledges, a broad shallow stream with a solid rock bottom. They waded their horses along it for three miles, then climbed out again on the same side.

Gordon knew that the Kirghiz, smelling out their trail like wolves, would follow them to the bank and expect some such ruse as an effort to hide their tracks. But he hoped that the nomads would be expecting them

to cross the stream and plunge into the mountains on the other side and would therefore waste time looking for tracks along the south bank.

He now headed westward in a more direct route. He did not expect to throw the Kirghiz entirely off the scent. He was only playing for time. If they lost his trail, they would search in any direction first except toward Yolgan, and to Yolgan he must go, since there was now no chance of catching his enemies on the road.

Dawn found them in the hills, a haggard, weary band. Gordon bade them halt and rest and, while they did so, he climbed the highest crag he could find and patiently scanned the surrounding cliffs and ravines with his binoculars, while he chewed tough strips of dried mutton which the tribesmen carried between saddle and saddlecloth to keep warm and soft. He alternated with cat naps of ten or fifteen minutes' duration, storing up concentrated energy as men of the outlands learn to do, and between times watching the ridges for signs of pursuit.

He let the men rest as long as he dared, and the sun was high when he descended the rock and stirred them into wakefulness. Their steel-spring bodies had recovered some of their resilience, and they rose and saddled with alacrity, all except one of the wounded men, who had died in his sleep. They lowered his body into a deep fissure in the rocks and went on, more slowly, for the horses felt the grind more than the men.

All day they threaded their way through wild gorges overhung by gloomy crags. The Turkomans were cowed by the grim desolation and the knowledge that a horde of bloodthirsty barbarians were on their trail. They followed Gordon without question as he led them, turning and twisting, along dizzy heights and down into the abysmal gloom of savage gorges, then up turreted ridges again and around windswept shoulders.



THROUGH WILD
GORGES

He had used every artifice known to him to shake off pursuit and was making for his set goal as fast as possible. He did not fear encountering any clans in these bare hills; they grazed their flocks on the lower levels. But he was not as familiar with the route he was following as his men thought.

He was feeling his way, mostly by the instinct for direction that men who live in the open possess, but he would have been lost a dozen times but for glimpses of Mount Erlik Khan shouldering up above the surrounding hills in the distance.

As they progressed westward he recognized other landmarks, seen from new angles, and just before sunset he glimpsed a broad shallow valley, across the pine-grown slopes of which he saw the walls of Yolgan looming against the crags behind it.

Yolgan was built at the foot of a mountain, overlooking the valley through which a stream wandered among masses of reeds and willows. Timber was unusually dense. Rugged mountains, dominated by Erlik's peak to the south, swept around the valley to the south and west, and in the north it was blocked by a chain of hills. To the east it was open, sloping down from a succession of uneven ridges. Gordon and his men had followed the ranges in their flight, and now they looked down on the valley from the south.

El Borak led the warriors down from the higher crags and hid them on one of the many gorges debouching on the lower slopes, not more than a mile and a half from the city itself. It ended in a cul-de-sac and suggested a trap, but the horses were ready to fall from exhaustion, the men's canteens were empty, and a spring gurgling out of the solid rock decided Gordon.

He found a ravine leading out of the gorge and placed men on guard there, as well as at the gorge mouth. It would serve as an avenue of escape if need

be. The men gnawed the scraps of food that remained, and dressed their wounds as best they could. When he told them he was going on a solitary scout they looked at him with lack-luster eyes, in the grip of the fatalism that is the heritage of the Turkish races.

They did not mistrust him, but they felt like dead men already. They looked like ghouls, with their dusty, torn garments, clotted with dried blood, and sunken eyes of hunger and weariness. They squatted or lay about, wrapped in their tattered cloaks, unspeaking.

Gordon was more optimistic than they. Perhaps they had not completely eluded the Kirghiz, but he believed it would take some time for even those human bloodhounds to ferret them out, and he did not fear discovery by the inhabitants of Yolgan. He knew they seldom wandered into the hills.

Gordon had neither slept nor eaten as much as his men, but his steely frame was more enduring than theirs, and he was animated by a terrific vitality that would keep his brain clear and his body vibrant long after another man had dropped in his tracks.

It was dark when Gordon strode on foot out of the gorge, the stars hanging over the peaks like points of chilled silver. He did not strike straight across the valley, but kept to the line of marching hills. So it was no great coincidence that he discovered the cave where men were hidden.

It was situated in a rocky shoulder that ran out into the valley, and which he skirted rather than clamber over. Tamarisk grew thickly about it, masking the mouth so effectually that it was only by chance that he glimpsed the reflection of a fire against a smooth inner wall.

Gordon crept through the thickets and peered in. It was a bigger cave than the mouth indicated. A small fire was going, and three men squatted by it, eating and conversing in guttural Pashto. Gordon recognized

three of the camp servants of the Englishmen. Farther back in the cave he saw the horses and heaps of camp equipment. The mutter of conversation was unintelligible where he crouched, and even as he wondered where the white men and the fourth servant were, he heard some one approaching.

He drew back farther into the shadows and waited, and presently a tall figure loomed in the starlight. It was the other Pathan, with his arms full of firewood.

As he strode toward the natural ramp which led up to the cave mouth, he passed so close to Gordon's hiding place that the American could have touched him with an extended arm. But he did not extend an arm; he sprang on the man's back like a panther on a buck.

The firewood was knocked in all directions and the two men rolled together down a short grassy slope, but Gordon's fingers were digging into the Pathan's bull throat, strangling his efforts to cry out, and the struggle made no noise that could have been heard inside the cave above the crackle of the tamarisk chunks.

The Pathan's superior height and weight were futile against the corded sinews and wrestling skill of his opponent. Heaving the man under him, Gordon crouched on his breast and throttled him dizzy before he relaxed his grasp and let life and intelligence flow back into his victim's dazed brain.

The Pathan recognized his captor and his fear was the greater, because he thought he was in the hands of a ghost. His eyes glimmered in the gloom and his teeth shone in the black tangle of his beard.

"Where are the Englishmen?" demanded Gordon softly. "Speak, you dog, before I break your neck!"

"They went at dusk toward the city of devils!" gasped the Pathan.

"Prisoners?"

“Nay; one with a shaven head guided them. They bore their weapons and were not afraid.”

“What are they doing here?”

“By Allah, I do not know!”

“Tell me all you do know,” commanded Gordon. “But speak softly. If your mates hear and come forth, you will suddenly cease to be. Begin where I went forth to shoot the stag. After that, Ormond killed Ahmed. That I know.”

“Aye; it was the Englishman. I had naught to do with it. I saw Ahmed lurking outside Pembroke Sahib’s tent. Presently Ormond Sahib came forth and dragged him in the tent. A gun spoke, and when we went to look, the Punjabi lay dead on the floor of the tent.

“Then the sahibs bade us strike the tents and load the pack horses, and we did so without question. We went westward in great haste. When the night was not yet half over, we sighted a camp of pagans, and my brothers and I were much afraid. But the sahibs went forward, and when the accursed ones came forth with arrows on string, Ormond Sahib held up a strange emblem which glowed in the light of the torches, whereupon the heathens dismounted and bowed to the earth.

“We abode in their camp that night. In the darkness some one came to the camp and there was fighting and a man slain, and Ormond Sahib said it was a spying Turkoman, and that there would be fighting, so at dawn we left the pagans and went westward in haste, across the ford. When we met other heathen, Ormond showed them the talisman, and they did us honor. All day we hastened, driving the beasts hard, and when night fell we did not halt, for Ormond Sahib was like one mad. So before the night was half gone, we came into this valley, and the sahibs hid us in this cave.

“Here we abode until a pagan passed near the cavern this morning, driving sheep. Then Ormond

Sahib called to him and showed him the talisman and made it known that he wished speech with the priest of the city. So the man went, and presently he returned with the priest who could speak Kashmiri. He and the sahibs talked long together, but what they said I know not. But Ormond Sahib killed the man who had gone to fetch the priest, and he and the priest hid the body with stones.

“Then after more talk, the priest went away, and the sahibs abode in the cave all day. But at dusk another man came to them, a man with a shaven head and camel’s hair robes, and they went with him toward the city. They bade us eat and then saddle and pack the animals, and be ready to move with great haste between midnight and dawn. That is all I know, as Allah is my witness.”

Gordon made no reply. He believed the man was telling the truth, and his bewilderment grew. As he meditated on the tangle, he unconsciously relaxed his grip, and the Pathan chose that instant to make his break for freedom. With a convulsive heave he tore himself partly free of Gordon’s grasp, whipped from his garments a knife he had been unable to reach before, and yelled loudly as he stabbed.

Gordon avoided the thrust by a quick twist of his body; the edge slit his shirt and the skin beneath, and stung by its bite and his peril, he caught the Pathan’s bull neck in both hands and put all his strength into a savage wrench. The man’s spinal column snapped like a rotten branch, and Gordon flung himself over backward into the thicker shadows as a man bulked black in the mouth of the cavern. The fellow called a cautious query, but Gordon waited for no more. He was already gone like a phantom into the gloom.

The Pathan repeated his call and then, getting no response, summoned his mates in some trepidation. With weapons in their hands they stole down the ramp,

and presently one of them stumbled over the body of their companion. They bent over it, muttering afrightedly.

"This is a place of devils," said one. "The devils have slain Akbar."

"Nay," said another. "It is the people of this valley. They mean to slay us one by one." He grasped his rifle and stared fearsomely into the shadows that hemmed them in. "They have bewitched the sahibs and led them away to be slain," he muttered.

"We will be next," said the third. "The sahibs are dead. Let us load the animals and go away quickly. Better die in the hills than wait like sheep for our throats to be cut."

A few minutes later they were hurrying eastward through the pines as fast as they could urge the beasts.

OF THIS Gordon knew nothing. When he left the slope below the cave he did not follow the trend of hills as before, but headed straight through the pines toward the lights of Yolgan. He had not gone far when he struck a road from the east leading toward the city. It wound among the pines, a slightly less dark thread in a bulwark of blackness.

He followed it to within easy sight of the great gate which stood open in the dark and massive walls of the town. Guards leaned carelessly on their matchlocks. Yolgan feared no attack. Why should it? The wildest of the Mohammedan tribes shunned the land of the devil worshipers. Sounds of barter and dispute were wafted by the night wind through the gate.

Somewhere in Yolgan, Gordon was sure, were the men he was seeking. That they intended returning to the cave he had been assured. But there was a reason why he wished to enter Yolgan, a reason not altogether tied up with vengeance. As he pondered, hidden in the deep shadow, he heard the soft *clop* of hoofs on

the dusty road behind him. He slid farther back among the pines; then with a sudden thought he turned and made his way back beyond the first turn, where he crouched in the blackness beside the road.

Presently a train of laden pack mules came along, with men before and behind and at either side. They bore no torches, moving like men who knew their path. Gordon's eyes had so adjusted themselves to the faint starlight of the road that he was able to recognize them as Kirghiz herdsmen in their long cloaks and round caps. They passed so close to him that their body-scent filled his nostrils.

He crouched lower in the blackness, and as the last man moved past him, a steely arm hooked fiercely about the Kirghiz's throat, choking his cry. An iron fist crunched against his jaw and he sagged senseless in Gordon's arms. The others were already out of sight around the bend of the trail, and the scrape of the mules' bulging packs against the branches along the road was enough to drown the slight noises of the struggle.

Gordon dragged his victim in under the black branches and swiftly stripped him, discarding his own boots and kaffiyeh and donning the native's garments, with pistol and scimitar buckled on under the long cloak. A few minutes later he was moving along after the receding column, leaning on his staff as with the weariness of long travel. He knew the man behind him would not regain consciousness for hours.

He came up with the tail of the train, but lagged behind as a straggler might. He kept close enough to the caravan to be identified with it, but not so close as to tempt conversation or recognition by the other members of the train. When they passed through the gate none challenged him. Even in the flare of the torches under the great gloomy arch he looked like a native,

with his dark features fitting in with his garments and the lambskin cap.

As he went down the torch-lighted street, passing unnoticed among the people who chattered and argued in the markets and stalls, he might have been one of the many Kirghiz shepherds who wandered about, gaping at the sights of the city which to them represented the last word in the metropolitan.

Yolgan was not like any other city in Asia. Legend said it was built long ago by a cult of devil worshipers who, driven from their distant homeland, had found sanctuary in this unmapped country, where an isolated branch of the Black Kirghiz, wilder than their kinsmen, roamed as masters. The people of the city were a mixed breed, descendants of these original founders and the Kirghiz.

Gordon saw the monks who were the ruling caste in Yolgan striding through the bazaars—tall, shaven-headed men with Mongolian features. He wondered anew as to their exact origin. They were not Tibetans. Their religion was not a depraved Buddhism. It was unadulterated devil worship. The architecture of their shrines and temples differed from any he had ever encountered anywhere.

But he wasted no time in conjecture, nor in aimless wandering. He went straight to the great stone building squatted against the side of the mountain at the foot of which Yolgan was built. Its great blank curtains of stone seemed almost like part of the mountain itself.

No one hindered him. He mounted a long flight of steps that were at least a hundred feet wide, bending over his staff as with the weariness of a long pilgrimage. Great bronze doors stood open, unguarded, and he kicked off his sandals and came into a huge hall the inner gloom of which was barely lighted by dim brazen lamps in which melted butter was burned.

Shaven-headed monks moved through the shadows like dusky ghosts, but they gave him no heed, thinking him merely a rustic worshipper come to leave some humble offering at the shrine of Erlik, Lord of the Seventh Hell.

At the other end of the hall, view was cut off by a great divided curtain of gilded leather that hung from the lofty roof to the floor. Half a dozen steps that crossed the hall led up to the foot of the curtain, and before it a monk sat cross-legged and motionless as a statue, arms folded and head bent as if in communion with unguessed spirits.

Gordon halted at the foot of the steps, made as if to prostrate himself, then retreated as if in sudden panic. The monk showed no interest. He had seen too many nomads from the outer world overcome by superstitious awe before the curtain that hid the dread effigy of Erlik Khan. The timid Kirghiz might skulk about the temple for hours before working up nerve enough to make his devotions to the deity. None of the priests paid any attention to the man in the caftan of a shepherd who slunk away as if abashed.

AS SOON as he was confident that he was not being watched, Gordon slipped through a dark doorway some distance from the gilded curtain and groped his way down a broad unlighted hallway until he came to a flight of stairs. Up this he went with both haste and caution and came presently into a long corridor along which winked sparks of light, like fireflies in a tunnel.

He knew these lights were tiny lamps in the small cells that lined the passage, where the monks spent long hours in contemplation of dark mysteries, or pored over forbidden volumes, the very existence of which is not suspected by the outer world. There was a stair at the nearer end of the corridor, and up this he went, without being discovered by the monks in their

cells. The pin points of light in the chambers did not serve to illuminate the darkness of the corridor to any extent.

As Gordon approached a crook in the stair he renewed his caution, for he knew there would be a man on guard at the head of the steps. He knew also that he would be likely to be asleep. The man was there—a half-naked giant with the wizened features of a deaf mute. A broad-tipped tulwar lay across his knees and his head rested on it as he slept.

Gordon stole noiselessly past him and came into an upper corridor which was dimly lighted by brass lamps hung at intervals. There were no doorless cells here, but heavy bronze-bound teak portals flanked the passage. Gordon went straight to one which was particularly ornately carved and furnished with an unusual fretted arch by way of ornament. He crouched there listening intently, then took a chance and rapped softly on the door. He rapped nine times, with an interval between each three raps.

There was an instant's tense silence, then an impulsive rush of feet across a carpeted floor, and the door was jerked open. A magnificent figure stood framed in the soft light. It was a woman, a lithe, splendid creature whose vibrant figure exuded magnetic vitality. The jewels that sparkled in the girdle about her supple hips were no more scintillant than her eyes.

Instant recognition blazed in those eyes, despite his native garments. She caught him in a fierce grasp. Her slender arms were strong as pliant steel.

“El Borak! I knew you would come!”

GORDON stepped into the chamber and closed the door behind him. A quick glance showed him there was no one there but themselves. Its thick Persian rugs, silk divans, velvet hangings, and gold-chased lamps struck a vivid contrast with the grim plainness of the

rest of the temple. Then he turned his full attention again to the woman who stood before him, her white hands clenched in a sort of passionate triumph.

"How did you know I would come, Yasmeena?" he asked.

"You never failed a friend in need," she answered.

"Who is in need?"

"I!"

"But you are a goddess!"

"I explained it all in my letter!" she exclaimed bewilderedly.

Gordon shook his head. "I have received no letter."

"Then why are you here?" she demanded in evident puzzlement.

"It's a long story," he answered. "Tell me first why Yasmeena, who had the world at her feet and threw it away for weariness to become a goddess in a strange land, should speak of herself as one in need."

"In desperate need, El Borak." She raked back her dark locks with a nervously quick hand. Her eyes were shadowed with weariness and something more, something which Gordon had never seen there before—the shadow of fear.

"Here is food you need more than I," she said as she sank down on a divan and with a dainty foot pushed toward him a small gold table on which were chupaties, curried rice, and broiled mutton, all in gold vessels, and a gold jug of kumiss.

He sat down without comment and began to eat with unfeigned gusto. In his drab camel's-hair caftan, with the wide sleeves drawn back from his corded brown arms, he looked out of place in that exotic chamber.

Yasmeena watched him broodingly, her chin resting on her hand, her somber eyes enigmatic.

"I did not have the world at my feet, El Borak," she said presently. "But I had enough of it to sicken me. It became a wine which had lost its savor. Flattery

became like an insult; the adulation of men became an empty repetition without meaning. I grew maddeningly weary of the flat fool faces that smirked eternally up at me, all wearing the same sheep expressions and animated by the same sheep thoughts. All except a few men like you, El Borak, and you were wolves in the flock. I might have loved you, El Borak, but there is something too fierce about you; your soul is a whetted blade on which I feared I might cut myself."

He made no reply, but tilted the golden jug and gulped down enough stinging kumiss to have made an ordinary man's head swim at once. He had lived the life of the nomads so long that their tastes had become his.

"So I became a princess, wife of a prince of Kashmir," she went on, her eyes smoldering with a marvelous shifting of clouds and colors. "I thought I knew the depths of men's swinishness. I found I had much to learn. He was a beast. I fled from him into India, and the British protected me when his ruffians would have dragged me back to him. He still offers many thousand rupees to any one who will bring me alive to him, so that he may soothe his vanity by having me tortured to death."

"I have heard a rumor to that effect," answered Gordon.

A recurrent thought caused his face to darken. He did not frown, but the effect was subtly sinister.

"That experience completed my distaste for the life I knew," she said, her dark eyes vividly introspective. "I remembered that my father was a priest of Yolgan who fled away for love of a stranger woman. I had emptied the cup and the bowl was dry. I remembered Yolgan through the tales my father told me when I was a babe, and a great yearning rose in me to lose the world and find my soul. All the gods I knew had proved false to me. The mark of Erlik was upon me—"

she parted her pearl-sewn vest and displayed a curious starlike mark between her firm breasts.

"I came to Yolgan as well you know, because you brought me, in the guise of a Kirghiz from Issik-kul. As you know, the people remembered my father, and though they looked on him as a traitor, they accepted me as one of them, and because of an old legend which spoke of the star on a woman's bosom, they hailed me as a goddess, the incarnation of the daughter of Erlik Khan.

"For a while after you went away I was content. The people worshiped me with more sincerity than I had ever seen displayed by the masses of civilization. Their curious rituals were strange and fascinating. Then I began to go further into their mysteries; I began to sense the essence below the formula—" She paused, and Gordon saw the fear grow in her eyes again.

"I had dreamed of a calm retreat of mystics, inhabited by philosophers. I found a haunt of bestial devils, ignorant of all but evil. Mysticism? It is black shamanism, foul as the tundras which bred it. I have seen things that made me afraid. Yes, I, Yasmeena, who never knew the meaning of the word, I have learned fear. Yogok, the high priest, taught me. You warned me against Yogok before you left Yolgan. Well had I heeded you. He hates me. He knows I am not divine, but he fears my power over the people. He would have slain me long ago had he dared.

"I am wearied to death of Yolgan. Erlik Khan and his devils have proved no less an illusion than the gods of India and the West. I have not found the perfect way. I have found only awakened desire to return to the world I cast away.

"I want to go back to Delhi. At night I dream of the noise and smells of the streets and bazaars. I am half

Indian, and all the blood of India is calling me. I was a fool. I had life in my hands and did not recognize it."

"WHY not go back, then?" asked Gordon.

She shuddered. "I cannot. The gods of Yolgan must remain in Yolgan forever. Should one depart, the people believe the city would perish. Yogok would be glad to see me go, but he fears the fury of the people too much either to slay me or aid me to escape. I knew there was but one man who might help me. I wrote a letter to you and smuggled it out by a Tajik trader. With it I sent my sacred emblem—a jeweled gold star—which would pass you safely through the country of the nomads. They would not harm a man bearing it. He would be safe from all but the priests of the city. I explained that in my letter."

"I never got it," Gordon answered. "I'm here after a couple of scoundrels whom I was guiding into the Uzbek country, and who for no apparent reason murdered my servant Ahmed and deserted me in the hills. They're in Yolgan now, somewhere."

"White men?" she exclaimed. "That is impossible! They could never have got through the tribes—"

"There's only one key to the puzzle," he interrupted. "Somehow your letter fell into their hands. They used your star to let them through. They don't mean to rescue you, because they got in touch with Yogok as soon as they reached the valley. There's only one thing I can think of—they intend kidnapping you to sell to your former husband."

She sat up straight; her white hands clenched on the edge of the divan and her eyes flashed. In that instant she looked as splendid and as dangerous as a cobra when it rears up to strike.

"Back to that pig? Where are these dogs? I will speak a word to the people and they shall cease to be!"

"That would betray yourself," returned Gordon.

"The people would kill the stranger, and Yogok, too, maybe, but they'd learn that you'd been trying to escape from Yolgan. They allow you the freedom of the temple, don't they?"

"Yes; with shaven-headed skulkers spying on my every move, except when I am on this floor, from which only a single stair leads down. That stair is always guarded."

"By a guard who sleeps," said Gordon. "That's bad enough, but if the people found you were trying to escape, they might shut you up in a little cell for the rest of your life. People are particularly careful of their deities."

She shuddered, and her fine eyes flashed the fear an eagle feels for a cage. "Then what are we to do?"

"I don't know—yet. I have nearly a hundred Turkoman ruffians hidden up in the hills, but just now they're more hindrance than help. There's not enough of them to do much good in a pitched battle, and they're almost sure to be discovered tomorrow, if not before. I brought them into this mess, and it's up to me to get them out—or as many as I can. I came here to kill these Englishmen, Ormond and Pembroke. But that can wait now. I'm going to get you out of here, but I don't dare move until I know where Yogok and the Englishmen are. Is there any one in Yolgan you can trust?"

"Any of the people would die for me, but they won't let me go. Only actual harm done me by the monks would stir them up against Yogok. No; I dare trust none of them."

"You say that stair is the only way up onto this floor?"

"Yes. The temple is built against the mountain, and galleries and corridors on the lower floors go back far into the mountain itself. But this is the highest floor, and is reserved entirely for me. There's no escape from it except down through the temple, swarming

with monks. I keep only one servant here at night, and she is at present sleeping in a chamber some distance from this and is senseless with bhang as usual."

"Good enough!" grunted Gordon. "Here, take this pistol. Lock the door after I go through and admit no one but myself. You'll recognize me by the nine raps, as usual."

"Where are you going?" she demanded, staring up and mechanically taking the weapon he tendered her, butt first.

"To do a little spying," he answered. "I've got to know what Yogok and the others are doing. If I tried to smuggle you out now, we might run square into them. I can't make plans until I know some of theirs. If they intend sneaking you out tonight, as I think they do, it might be a good idea to let them do it, and then swoop down with the Turkomans and take you away from them, when they've got well away from the city. But I don't want to do that unless I have to. Bound to be shooting and a chance of your getting hit by a stray bullet. I'm going now; listen for my rap."



THE MUTE guard still slumbered on the stair as Gordon glided past him. No lights glinted now as he descended into the lower corridor. He knew the cells were all empty, for the monks slept in chambers on a lower level. As he hesitated, he heard sandals shuffling down the passage in the pitch blackness.

Stepping into one of the cells he waited until the un-

seen traveler was opposite him, then he hissed softly. The tread halted and a voice muttered a query.

"Art thou Yatub?" asked Gordon in the gutturals of the Kirghiz. Many of the lower monks were pure Kirghiz in blood and speech.

"Nay," came the answer. "I am Ojuh. Who art thou?"

"No matter; call me Yogok's dog if thou wilt. I am a watcher. Have the white men come into the temple yet?"

"Aye. Yogok brought them by the secret way, lest the people suspect their presence. If thou art close to Yogok, tell me—what is his plan?"

"What is thine own opinion?" asked Gordon.

An evil laugh answered him, and he could feel the monk leaning closer in the darkness to rest an elbow on the jamb.

"Yogok is crafty," he murmured. "When the Tajik whom Yasmeena bribed to bear her letter showed it to Yogok, our master bade him do as she had instructed him. When the man for whom she sent came for her, Yogok planned to slay both him and her, making it seem to the people that the white man had slain their goddess."

"Yogok is not forgiving," said Gordon at a venture.

"A cobra is more so." The monk laughed. "Yasmeena has thwarted him too often in the matter of sacrifices for him to allow her to depart in peace."

"Yet such is now his plan!" asserted Gordon.

"Nay; thou art a simple man, for one who calls himself a watcher. The letter was meant for El Borak. But the Tajik was greedy and sold it to these sahibs and told them of Yogok. They will not take her to India. They will sell her to a prince in Kashmir who will have her beaten to death with a slipper. Yogok himself will guide them through the hills by the secret route. He



• YASMEENA •

• THE DAUGHTER OF ERLIK KHAN •

is in terror of the people, but his hate for Yasmeena overcomes him.”

Gordon had heard all he wished to know, and he was in a sudden rush to be gone. He had abandoned his tentative plan of letting Ormond get the girl outside the city before rescuing her. With Yogok guiding the Englishmen through hidden passes, he might find it impossible to overtake them.

The monk, however, was in no hurry to conclude the conversation. He began speaking again, and then Gordon saw a light moving like a glowworm in the blackness, and he heard a swift patter of bare feet and a man breathing heavily. He drew farther back into the cell.

It was another monk who came up the corridor, carrying a small brass lamp that lighted his broad, thin-lipped face and made him look something like a Mongolian devil.

As he saw the monk outside the cell, he began hastily: “Yogok and the white men have gone to Yasmeena’s chamber. The girl, her servant who spied upon her, has told us that the white devil El Borak is in Yolgan. He talked with Yasmeena less than half an hour ago. The girl sped to Yogok as swiftly as she dared, but she dared not stir until he had left Yasmeena’s chamber. He is somewhere in the temple. I gather men to search. Come with me, thou, and thou also—”

He swung the lamp about so that it shone full on Gordon, crouching in the cell. As the man blinked to see the garments of a shepherd instead of the familiar robes of a monk, Gordon lashed out for his jaw, quick and silent as the stroke of a python. The monk went down like a man shot in the head, and even as the lamp smashed on the floor, Gordon had leaped and grappled with the other man in the sudden darkness.

A single cry rang to the vaulted roof before it was

strangled in the corded throat. The monk was hard to hold as a snake, and he kept groping for a knife, but as they crashed into the stone wall, Gordon smashed his opponent's head savagely against it. The man went limp and Gordon flung him down beside the other senseless shape.

THE NEXT instant Gordon was racing up the stairway. It was only a few steps from the cell where he had hidden, its upper portion dim in the subdued light of the upper corridor. He knew no one had gone up or down while he talked with the monk. Yet the man with the lamp had said that Yogok and the others had gone to Yasmeena's chamber, and that her treacherous servant girl had come to them.

He rounded the crook with reckless haste, his scimitar ready, but the slumping figure at the stairhead did not rise to oppose him. There was a new sag in the mute's shoulders as he huddled on the steps. He had been stabbed in the back, so fiercely that the spinal column had been severed with one stroke.

Gordon wondered why the priest should kill one of his own servants, but he did not pause; premonition gripping his heart, he hurled himself down the corridor and in through the arched doorway, which was unbolted. The chamber was empty. Cushions from the divan were strewn on the floor. Yasmeena was not to be seen.

Gordon stood like a statue in the center of the room, his scimitar in his hand. The blue sheen of the light on steel was no more deadly than the glitter of his black eyes. His gaze swept the room, lingering no longer on a slight bulge in the hangings on the rear wall than anywhere else.

He turned toward the door, took a step—then wheeled and raced across the chamber like a gust of wind, slashing and hacking at the tapestry before the man hiding there realized he was discovered. The keen

edge ribboned the velvet arras and blood spurted; out of the tatters a figure toppled to the floor—a shaven monk, literally cut to pieces. He had dropped his knife and could only grovel and moan, clutching at his spurting arteries.

“Where is she?” snarled Gordon, panting with passion as he crouched over his hideous handiwork. “Where is she?”

But the man only whimpered and yammered and died without speaking.

Gordon ran to the walls and began ripping the hangings away. Somewhere he knew there must be a secret door. But the walls showed blank, resisting his most violent efforts. He could not follow Yasmeena by the route her abductors had obviously carried her. He must escape from the city and hasten to the cave, where the servants were hidden, and to which the Englishmen would undoubtedly return. He was sweating with the violence of his rage, which almost submerged caution. He ripped off the camel’s hair robe, feeling in his frenzy that it cramped and hampered him.

But the action brought a thought born of cold reason. The garments of the senseless monks in the corridor below would furnish him a disguise which would aid him to pass unhindered through the temple, where he knew scores of shaven-headed murderers were hunting him.

He ran silently from the chamber, passed the sprawling corpse, rounded the turn of the stair—then he stopped short. The lower corridor was a blaze of light, and at the foot of the stairs stood a mass of monks, holding torches and swords. He saw rifles in the hands of a dozen.

Details sprang out in startling clarity in the instant that the monks yelled and raised their rifles. Beyond them he saw a round-faced slant-eyed girl crouching by the wall. She grasped a rope which hung down the

wall and jerked, and Gordon felt the stairs give way beneath him. The rifles roared in a ragged volley as he shot down the black opening which gaped beneath his feet, and the bullets whined over his head. A fierce cry of triumph rose from the monks.



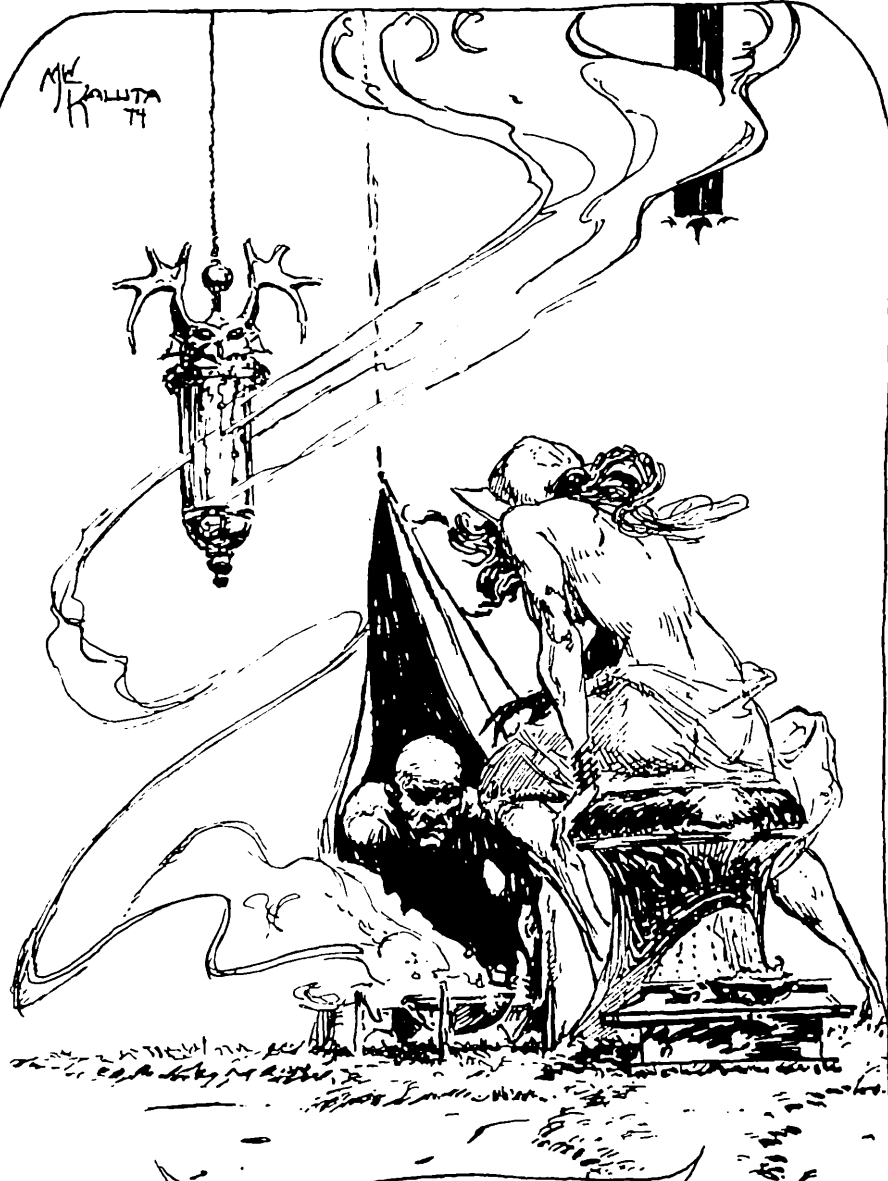
AFTER Gordon left her, Yasmeena made fast the door and returned to her divan. She idly studied the big pistol he had left with her, fascinated by the blue gleam of the light on its dully polished steel.

Then she tossed it aside and lay back with her eyes closed. There was a certain sophistication or innate mysticism in her which refused to let her put much faith in material weapons. Hers was that overrefinement of civilization which instinctively belittles physical action. With all her admiration for Gordon, he was, after all, to her, a barbarian who put his trust in lead and steel.

She undervalued the weapon he had left with her, and so it was out of her reach when the noise of a swishing tapestry roused her. She turned and stared at the rear wall with eyes suddenly dilated. Behind the hanging she knew—or thought she knew—was solid stone wall, built hard against the sheer mountainside.

But now that hanging lifted, grasped in a yellow clawlike hand. The hand was followed by a face—an evil, leering, grayish face, with slanted eyes and lank

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THE SLANT-EYED MAN

hair falling over a narrow forehead. A thin gash of a mouth gaped, revealing pointed teeth.

She was so astounded that she sat frozen, unable to supply the simple explanation of the phenomenon, until the man entered the room with a slithering silence repulsively suggestive of a snake. Then she saw that a black opening gaped in the wall behind the lifted arras, and two faces were framed in it—white men's faces, hard and inexorable as stone.

She sprang up then and snatched for the revolver, but it was at the other end of the divan. She ran around for it, but the slant-eyed man, with a motion incredibly quick, was before her and crushed her cruelly in his lean arms, clapping a hand over her mouth. He heeded the twisting and writhing of her supple body no more than the struggles of a child.

"Swift!" he ordered in harsh gutturals. "Bind her!"

The white men had followed him into the chamber, but it was a monk who obeyed, adding a velvet gag. One of the white men picked up the pistol.

"See to the mute who slumbers on the stairs," her captor ordered. "He is not our man, but a creature set by the people to guard her. Even a mute can speak by gestures sometimes."

The evil-faced monk bowed deeply and, unbolting the door, went out, thumbing a long knife. Another monk stood in the secret entrance.

"You did not know of the hidden door," jeered the slant-eyed man. "You fool! The mountain below this temple is honeycombed with tunnels. You have been spied on constantly. The girl whom you thought drunk on bhang watched tonight while you talked with El Borak. That will not alter my plans any, though, except that I have set my monks to slay El Borak.

"Then we will show the people his body and tell them that you have returned to your father in the

Seventh Hell because Yolgan has been polluted by the presence of a Feringhi. In the meantime these sahibs will be well on their way to Kashmir with you, my lovely goddess! Daughter of Erlik! Bah!"

"We're wasting time, Yogok," broke in Ormond roughly. "Once in the hills, you say, we won't meet any of the Kirghiz, but I want to be far from Yolgan by daylight."

The priest nodded and motioned to the monk who came forward and lifted Yasmeena onto a litter he carried. Pembroke took the other end. At that moment the other monk glided back into the chamber, wiping blood from his curved blade.

Yogok directed him to hide behind the hangings. "El Borak might return before the others find him."

THEN they passed through the hidden door into darkness lighted by a butter lamp in Yogok's hand. The priest slid to the heavy section of stone that formed part of the wall and made it fast with a bronze bar. Yasmeena saw by the small light of the lamp that they were in a narrow corridor which slanted downward at a pitch which grew steeper until it ended in a long narrow stair cut out of solid rock.

At the bottom of this stair they struck a level tunnel which they followed for some time, the Englishmen and the monk alternating with the litter. It ended at last in a wall of rock, in the center of which was a stone block which worked on a pivot. This turned, they emerged into a cave, at the mouth of which stars were visible through a tangle of branches.

When Yogok pushed the block back in place its rough exterior looked like part of a solid wall. He extinguished the lamp and a moment later was pushing aside the massed willows which masked the cave mouth. As they emerged into the starlight, Yasmeena saw that these willows stood on the bank of a stream.

When her captors had pushed through the trees, waded the shallow channel, and ascended the farther bank, she saw a cluster of lights off to her right. Those lights were Yolgan. They had followed tunnels out into the solid rock of the mountain and had come out at its foot less than half a mile from the city. Directly ahead of her the forest lifted in rows of black ramparts, and off to the left the hills climbed in marching lines.

Her captors set off through the starlight, their apparent objective a jutting shoulder less than half a mile to the east. The distance was covered in silence. The nervousness of the white men was no more evident than that of Yogok. Each man was thinking what his fate would be if the common people of Yolgan discovered them kidnapping their goddess.

Yogok's fear was greater than that of the Englishmen. He had covered his tracks with corpses—the shepherd who had brought him Ormond's message, the mute guardian of the stairs; his teeth chattered as he conjured up possibilities. El Borak must die without speaking, also; that, he had drilled into the monks.

"Faster! Faster!" he urged, a note of panic in his voice as he glared at the black forest walls about him. In the moan of the night wind he seemed to hear the stealthy tread of pursuers.

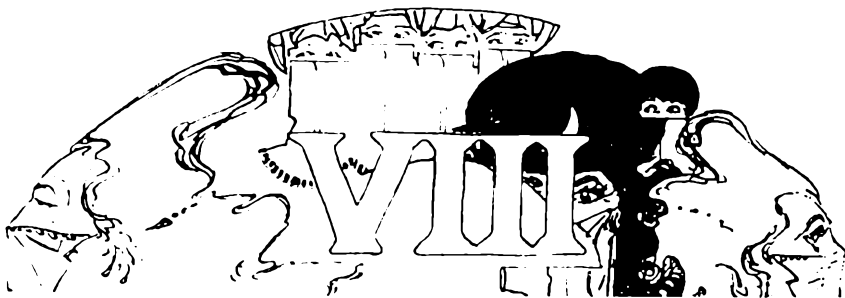
"Here's the cave," grunted Ormond. "Set her down; no use lugging her up that slope. I'll go get the servants and the horses. We'll mount her on one of the pack animals. Have to leave some of our stuff behind, anyhow. Ohai, Akbar!" he called softly.

There was no answer. The fire had gone out in the cave and the mouth gaped black and silent.

"Have they gone to sleep?" Ormond swore irritably. "I'll jolly well wake 'em. Wait!"

He ran lightly up the rough ramp and vanished in the cave. A moment later his voice reached them, echo-

ing hollowly between the rocky walls. The echoes did not disguise the sudden fear in his voice.



WHEN Gordon fell through the treacherous stairs, he shot downward in utter blackness to land on solid stone. Not one man in a hundred could have survived the fall with unsmashed bones, but El Borak was all knit wires and steel springs. He landed on all fours, catlike, with bent joints absorbing the shock. Even so his whole body was numbed, and his limbs crumpled under him, letting his frame dash violently against the stone.

He lay there half stunned for a space, then pulled himself together, cursing the stinging and tingling of his hands and feet, and felt himself for broken bones.

Thankful to find himself intact, he groped for and found the scimitar which he had cast from him as he fell. Above him the trap had closed. Where he was he had no idea, but it was dark as a Stygian vault. He wondered how far he had fallen, and felt that it was farther than any one would ever believe, supposing he escaped to tell of it. He felt about in the darkness and found that he was in a square cell of no great dimensions. The one door was locked on the outside.

His investigations took him only a matter of seconds, and it was while he was feeling the door that he heard someone fumbling at it on the other side. He

drew back, believing that those who dropped him into the cell would scarcely have had time to reach it by a safer way. He believed it was someone who had heard the sound of his fall and was coming to investigate, doubtless expecting to find a corpse on the floor.

The door was cast open and light blinded him, but he cut at the vague figure which loomed in the open door. Then his eyes could see and they saw a monk lying on the floor of a narrow lamp-lighted corridor with his shaven head split to the temples. The passage was empty except for the dead man.

The floor of the corridor sloped slightly, and Gordon went down it, because to go up it would obviously be returning toward his enemies. He momentarily expected to hear them howling on his heels, but evidently they considered that his fall through the trap, riddled, as they thought, with bullets, was sufficient and were in no hurry to verify their belief. Doubtless it was the duty of the monk he had killed to finish off victims dropped through the trap on the stairs.

The corridor made a sharp turn to the right and the lamps no longer burned along the walls. Gordon took one of them and went on, finding that the pitch of the slope grew steeper until he was forced to check his descent with a hand braced against the wall. These walls were solid rock, and he knew he was in the mountain on which the temple was built.

He did not believe any of the inhabitants of Yolgan knew of these tunnels except the monks; certainly Yasmeena was ignorant of them. Thought of the girl made him wince. Heaven alone knew where she was, just then, but he could not aid her until he had escaped himself from these rat-runs.

Presently the passage turned at right angles into a broader tunnel which ran level, and he followed it hastily but cautiously, holding his lamp high. Ahead of

him he saw the tunnel end at last against a rough stone wall in which a door was set in the shape of a ponderous square block. This, he discovered, was hung on a pivot, and it revolved with ease, letting him through into a cave beyond.

As Yasmeena had seen the stars among the branches not long before, Gordon now discovered them. He put out his lamp, halted an instant to let his eyes get used to the sudden darkness, and then started toward the cavern mouth.

Just as he reached it, he crouched back. Somebody was splashing through the water outside, thrashing through the willows. The man came panting up the short steep slope, and Gordon saw the evil face of Yogok in the starlight before the man became a shapeless blob of blackness as he plunged into the cavern.

The next instant El Borak sprang, bearing his man to the floor. Yogok let out one hair-raising yell, and then Gordon found his throat and crouched over him, savagely digging and twisting his fingers in the priest's neck.

"Where is Yasmeena?" he demanded.

A gurgle answered him. He relaxed his grip a trifle and repeated the question. Yogok was mad with fear of this attack in the dark, but somehow—probably by the body-scent or the lack of it—he divined that his captor was a white man.

"Are you El Borak?" he gasped.

"Who else? Where is Yasmeena?" Gordon emphasized his demand by a wrench which brought a gurgle of pain from Yogok's thin lips.

"The Englishmen have her!" he panted.

"Where are they?"

"Nay; I know not! Ahhh! Mercy, sahib! I will tell!"

Yogok's eyes glimmered white with fear in the darkness. His lean body was shaking as with an ague.

"We took her to a cave where the sahibs' servants

were hidden. They were gone, with the horses. The Englishmen accused me of treachery. They said I had made away with their servants and meant to murder them. They lied. By Erlik, I know not what became of their cursed Pathans! The Englishmen attacked me, but I fled while a servant of mine fought with them."

Gordon hauled him to his feet, faced him toward the cave mouth and bound his hands behind him with his own girdle.

"We're going back," he said grimly. "One yelp out of you and I'll let out your snake's soul. Guide me as straight to Ormond's cave as you know."

"Nay; the dogs will slay me!"

"I'll kill you if you don't," Gordon assured him, pushing Yogok stumbling before him.

The priest was not a back-to-the-wall fighter. Confronted by two perils he chose the more remote. They waded the stream and on the other side Yogok turned to the right. Gordon jerked him back.

"I know where I am now," he growled. "And I know where the cave is. It's in that jut of land to the left. If there's a path through the pines, show it to me."

Yogok surrendered and hurried through the shadows, conscious of Gordon's grasp on his collar and the broad edge of Gordon's scimitar glimmering near. It was growing toward the darkness that precedes dawn as they came to the cave which loomed dark and silent among the trees.

"They are gone!" Yogok shivered.

"I didn't expect to find them here," muttered Gordon. "I came here to pick up their trail. If they thought you'd set the natives on them, they'd pull out on foot. What worries me is what they did with Yasmeena."

"Listen!"

Yogok started convulsively as a low moan smote the air.

Gordon threw him and lashed together his hands and feet. "Not a sound out of you!" he warned, and then stole up the ramp, sword ready.

At the mouth he hesitated unwilling to show himself against the dim starlight behind him. Then he heard the moan again and knew it was not feigned. It was a human being in mortal agony.

He felt his way into the darkness and presently stumbled over something yielding, which evoked another moan. His hands told him it was a man in European clothing. Something warm and oozy smeared his hands as he groped. Feeling in the man's pockets he found a box of matches and struck one, cupping it in his hands.

A livid face with glassy eyes stared up at him.

"Pembroke!" muttered Gordon.

The sound of his name seemed to rouse the dying man. He half rose on an elbow, blood trickling from his mouth with the effort.

"Ormond!" he whispered ghastly. "Have you come back? Damn you, I'll do for you yet—"

"I'm not Ormond," growled the American. "I'm Gordon. It seems somebody has saved me the trouble of killing you. Where's Yasmeena?"

"He took her away." The Englishman's voice was scarcely intelligible, choked by the flow of blood. "Ormond, the dirty swine! We found the cave empty—knew old Yogok had betrayed us. We jumped him. He ran away. His damned monk stabbed me. Ormond took Yasmeena and the monk and went away. He's mad. He's going to try to cross the mountains on foot, with the girl, and the monk to guide him. And he left me to die, the swine, the filthy swine!"

The dying man's voice rose to a hysterical shriek; he heaved himself up, his eyes glaring; then a terrible shudder ran through his body and he was dead.

Gordon rose, struck another match and swept a glance over the cave. It was utterly bare. Not a fire-arm in sight. Ormond had evidently robbed his dying partner. Ormond, starting through the mountains with a captive woman, and a treacherous monk for a guide, on foot and with no provisions—surely the man must be mad.

Returning to Yogok he unbound his legs, repeating Pembroke's tale in a few words. He saw the priest's eyes gleam in the starlight.

"Good! They will all die in the mountains! Let them go!"

"We're following them," Gordon answered. "You know the way the monk will lead Ormond. Show it to me."

A restoration of confidence had wakened insolence and defiance.

"No! Let them die!"

With a searing curse Gordon caught the priest's throat and jammed his head back between his shoulders, until his eyes were glaring at the stars.

"Damn you!" he ground between his teeth, shaking the man as a dog shakes a rat. "If you try to balk me now I'll kill you the slowest way I know. Do you want me to drag you back to Yolgen and tell the people what you plotted against the daughter of Erlik Khan? They'll kill me, but they'll flay you alive!"

Yogok knew Gordon would not do that, not because the American feared death, but because to sacrifice himself would be to remove Yasmeena's last hope. But Gordon's glaring eyes made him cold with fear; he sensed the abysmal rage that gripped the white man and knew that El Borak was on the point of tearing him limb from limb. In that moment there was no bloody deed of which Gordon was not capable.

"Stay, sahib!" Yogok gasped. "I will guide you."

"And guide me right!" Gordon jerked him savage-

ly to his feet. "They have been gone less than an hour. If we don't overtake them by sunrise, I'll know you've led me astray, and I'll tie you head down to a cliff for the vultures to eat alive."



IN THE darkness before dawn Yogok led Gordon up into the hills by a narrow trail that wound among ravines and windy crags, climbing ever southward. The eternal lights of Yolgan fell away behind them, growing smaller and smaller with distance.

They left half a mile to the east of the gorge where the Turkomans were concealed. Gordon ardently wished to get his men out of that ravine before dawn, but he dared not take the time now. His eyes burned from lack of sleep and moments of giddiness assailed him, but the fire of his driving energy burned fiercer than ever. He urged the priest to greater and greater speed until sweat dripped like water from the man's trembling limbs.

"He'll practically have to drag the girl. She'll fight him every step of the way. And he'll have to beat the monk every now and then to make him point out the right path. We ought to be gaining on them at every step."

Full dawn found them climbing a ledge that pitched up around a gigantic shoulder where the wind stag-

gered them. Then, off to the left, sounded a sudden rattle of rifle fire. The wind brought it in snatches. Gordon turned, loosing his binoculars. They were high above the ridges and hills that rimmed the valley.

He could see Yolgan in the distance, like a huddle of toy blocks. He could see the gorges that debouched into the valley spread out like the finger of a hand. He saw the gorge in which his Turkomans had taken refuge. Black dots which he knew were men were scattered among the boulders at the canyon mouth and up on the rims of the walls; tiny white puffs spurted.

Even before he brought his glasses into play he knew that the pursuing Kirghiz had at last smelled his men out. The Turkomans were bottled in the gorge. He saw puffs of smoke jetting from the rocks that from the mountainside overhung the ravine leading out of the canyon. Strings of dots moved out of the gates of Yolgan, which were men coming to investigate the shooting. Doubtless the Kirghiz had sent riders to bring the men of the city.

Yogok shrieked and fell down flat on the ledge. Gordon felt his cap tugged from his head as if by an invisible hand, and there came to him the flat sharp crack of a rifle.

He dropped behind a boulder and began scanning the narrow, sheer-walled plateau upon which the ledge debouched. Presently a head and part of a shoulder rose above a shelf of rock, and then a rifle came up and spoke flatly. The bullet knocked a chip out of the boulder near Gordon's elbow.

Ormond had been making even poorer time than Gordon hoped, and seeing his pursuers gaining, had turned to make a fight of it. That he recognized Gordon was evident from his mocking shouts. There was a hint of hysteria in them.

Yogok was too helpless with terror to do anything but hug the ledge and moan. Gordon began working his

way toward the Englishman. Evidently Ormond did not know that he had no firearm. The sun was not yet above the peaks when it turned to fire, and the light and atmosphere of those altitudes make for uncertain shooting.

Ormond blazed away as Gordon flitted from ridge to boulder and from rock to ledge, and sometimes his lead whispered perilously close. But Gordon was gliding ever nearer, working his way so that the sun would be behind him when it rose. Something about that silent shadowy figure that he could not hit began to shake Ormond's nerve; it was more like being stalked by a leopard than by a human being.

Gordon could not see Yasmeena, but presently he saw the monk. The man took advantage of a moment when Ormond was loading his rifle. He sprang up from behind the ledge with his hands tied behind his back, and scudded across the rock like a rabbit. Ormond, like a man gone mad, jerked a pistol and put a bullet between his shoulders, and he stumbled and slid screaming over the thousand-foot edge.

Gordon broke cover, too, and came ripping across the treacherous rock like a gust of hill wind. As he came the sun burst up over a ridge behind him, full in Ormond's eyes. The Englishman yelled incoherently, trying to shade his eyes with his left arm, and began firing half blindly. The bullets ripped past Gordon's head or knocked up splinters of stone at his speeding feet. Panic had Ormond, and he was firing without proper aim.

Then the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Another stride and Gordon would reach him with that hovering arc of steel that the sun turned crimson. Ormond hurled the pistol blindly, yelling "You damned werewolf! I'll cheat you yet!" and bounded far out, arms outspread.

His feet struck the sloping lip of a fissure and he

shot down and vanished so suddenly it was like the unreality of a dream.

Gordon reached the crevice and glared down into echoing darkness. He could see nothing, but the chasm seemed bottomless. With an angry shrug he turned away, disappointed.

BEHIND the stony shelf Gordon found Yasmeena lying with her arms bound, where Ormond had flung her down. Her soft slippers hung in tatters, and the bruises and abrasions on her tender flesh told of Ormond's brutal attempts to force her at top speed along the rocky path.

Gordon cut her cords and she caught his arms with all her old fierceness of passion. There was no fear in her eyes now, only wild excitement.

"They said you were dead!" she cried. "I knew they lied! They cannot kill you any more than they can kill the mountains or the wind that blows across them. You have Yogok. I saw him. He knows the secret paths better than the monk Ormond killed. Let us go, while the Kirghiz are killing the Turkomans! What if we have no supplies? It is summer. We shall not freeze. We can starve for a while if need be. Let us go!"

"I brought those men to Yogan with me for my own purposes, Yasmeena," he replied. "Even for you I can't desert them."

She nodded her splendid head. "I expected that from you, El Borak."

Ormond's rifle lay near by but there were no cartridges for it. He cast it over the precipice and, taking Yasmeena's hand, led her back to the ledge where Yogok lay yammering.

Gordon hauled him erect and pointed to the gorge where the white puffs spurted.

"Is there a way to reach that gorge without returning to the valley? Your life depends on it."

"Half these gorges have hidden exits," answered Yogok, shivering. "That one has. But I cannot guide you along that route with my arms tied."

Gordon unbound his hands, but tied the girdle about the priest's waist and retained the other end in his hand. "Lead on," he ordered.

Yogok led them back along the ledge they had just traversed to a point where, halfway along it, it was cut by a great natural causeway of solid stone. They made their way along it, with dizzy depths echoing on either hand, to a broad ledge which skirted a deep canyon. They followed this ledge around a colossal crag and after a while Yogok plunged into a cave which opened upon the narrow path.

This they traversed in semidarkness relieved by light which filtered in from a ragged crevice in the roof. The cave wound steeply downward, following a fault in the rock, and they came out at last in a triangular cleft between towering walls. The narrow slit which was the cave mouth opened in a side of the cleft and was masked from outer view by a spur of rock that looked like part of a solid wall. Gordon had looked into that cleft the day before and failed to discover the cave.

The sound of firing had grown louder as they advanced along the twisting cave, and now it filled the defile with thundering echoes. They were in the gorge of the Turkomans. Gordon saw the wiry warriors crouching among the boulders at the mouth, firing at the fur-capped heads which appeared among the rocks of the outer slopes.

He shouted before they saw him, and they nearly shot him before they recognized him. He went toward them, dragging Yogok with him, and the warriors stared in silent amazement at the shivering priest and the girl in her tattered finery. She scarcely noticed them; they were wolves whose fangs she did not fear;

all her attention was centered on Gordon. When a bullet whined near her she did not flinch.

Men crouched at the mouth of the ravine, firing into it. Bullets hummed back up the gut.

"They stole up in the darkness," grunted Orkhan, binding up a bleeding bullet hole in his forearm. "They had the gorge mouth surrounded before our sentries saw them. They cut the throat of the sentry we had stationed down the ravine and came stealing up it. Had not others in the gorge seen them and opened fire, they would have cut all our throats while we slept. Aye, they were like cats that see in the dark. What shall we do, El Borak? We are trapped. We cannot climb these walls. There is the spring, and grass for the horses, and we have slept, but we have no food left and our ammunition will not last forever."

Gordon took a yataghan from one of the men and handed it to Yasmeena.

"Watch Yogok," he directed. "Stab him if he seeks to escape."

And from the flash of her eyes he knew that she at last realized the value of direct action in its proper place, and that she would not hesitate to carry out his order. Yogok looked like a singed serpent in his fury, but he feared Yasmeena as much as he did Gordon.

El Borak collected a rifle and a handful of cartridges on his way to the boulder-strewn gorge mouth. Three Turkomans lay dead among the rocks and others were wounded. The Kirghiz were working their way up the outer slope on foot from rock to rock, trying to get in to close quarters where their superior numbers would count, but not willing to sacrifice too many lives to get there. Up from the city a ragged line of men was streaming through the pines.

"We've got to get out of this trap before the monks come up with the Kirghiz and lead them up in the hills and down through that cave," Gordon muttered.

He could see them already toiling up the first ridges of the hills, shouting frantically to the tribesmen as they came. Working in fierce haste he told off half a dozen men on the best horses, and mounting Yogok and Yasmeena on spare steeds, he ordered the priest to lead the Turkomans back through the cave. To Orkhan Shah he gave instructions to follow Yasmeena's orders, and so imbued with trust was the Turkoman that he made no objections to obeying a woman.

Three of the men remaining with him Gordon stationed at the ravine, and with the other three he held the mouth of the canyon. They began firing as the others urged their horses down the defile. The men on the lower slopes sensed that the volleys were diminishing and came storming up the acclivities, only to take cover again as they were swept by a hail of lead, the deadly accuracy of which made up for its lack of volume. Gordon's presence heartened his men and they put new spirit in their rifle work.

WHEN the last rider had disappeared into the cleft, Gordon waited until he thought the fugitives had time enough to traverse the winding cave, and then he fell back swiftly, picked up the men at the ravine, and raced for the hidden exit. The men outside suspected a trap in the sudden cessation of the firing, and they held back for long minutes, during which time Gordon and his men were galloping through the twisting cavern, their hoofs filling the narrow gut with thunder.

The others awaited them on the ledge skirting the ravine and Gordon sent them hurrying on. He cursed because he could not be at two places at once—at the head of the column bullying Yogok, and at the rear watching for the first of the pursuers to ride out on the ledge. But Yasmeena, flourishing the knife at the priest's throat, was guarantee against treachery at the

front. She had sworn to sink the blade in his breast if the Kirghiz came within rifle range, and Yogok sweated with fear and himself urged the band onward.

They moved around the corner of the crag and out across the ridge, a knife-edged causeway half a mile in length, with a sheet of rock slanting steeply down for a thousand feet on either hand.

Gordon waited alone at the angle of the ledge. When his party was moving like insects along the crest of the ridge, the first of the Kirghiz came racing out on the ledge. Sitting his horse behind a jutting spur of rock, Gordon lined his sights carefully and fired. It was a long range, even for him; so long that he missed the first rider and hit the horse instead.

The stricken beast reared high, screaming, and plunged backward. The ledge was narrow where the cave opened on it. The screams and plunges of the maddened animal, before it toppled over the edge, put the horses in confusion behind it. Three more got out of control and were carried over the cliff with their riders, and the other Kirghiz retreated into the cave. After a while they tried again, but a bullet spattering on the rock sent them scurrying back.

A glance over his shoulder showed Gordon his horsemen just dropping off the ridge onto the farther ledge. He reined about and sent his horse flying along the path. If he loitered, the Kirghiz might venture out again, find no one opposing them, and reach the bend of the trail in time to pick him off the causeway.

Most of his hardened band had dismounted, leading their horses at a walk. Gordon rode at a gallop with death yawning on either hand if the horse slipped or put a single foot wrong. But the beast was sure-footed as a mountain sheep.

Gordon's head swam from lack of sleep as he glanced down into the blue haze of the abyss, but he

did not slacken his pace. When he dropped down the slope onto the ledge where Yasmeena stood, white-faced and her nails biting into her pink palms, the Kirghiz had not yet appeared.

Gordon pushed his riders as hard as he dared, making them from time to time change to the spare horses, to save the animals as much as possible. Nearly a dozen of these still remained. Many of the men were giddy with dizziness caused by hunger and the altitude. He himself was mad for sleep and kept himself awake only by an effort of will that made the hills reel to his gaze.

He kept his grip on clarity of purpose as only a man toughened by a savagely hard life can do, and led them on, following the paths Yogok pointed out. They skirted ledges that hovered over ravines the bottoms of which were lost in shadowy gloom. They plunged through defiles like a knife cut where sheer walls rose up to the skies on either hand.

Behind them from time to time they heard faint yells, and once, when they toiled up over the shoulder of a breathtaking crag on a path where the horses fought for footing, they saw their pursuers far below and behind them. The Kirghiz and monks were not maintaining such a suicidal pace; hate is seldom as desperate as the will to live.

The snowy crest of Mount Erlik loomed higher and higher before them, and Yogok, when questioned, swore that the way to safety lay through the mountain. More he would not say; he was green with fear, and his mind held to but one thought—to keep the trail that would buy his life. He feared his captors no more than he feared that his pursuing subjects would overtake them and learn of his duplicity in regard to their goddess.

They pushed on like men already dead, beginning to stagger with weakness and exhaustion. The horses

drooped and stumbled. The wind was like whetted steel. Darkness was gathering when they followed the backbone of a giant ridge which ran like a natural causeway to the sheer slope of Mount Erlik Khan.

The mountain towered gigantically above them, a brutish mass of crags and dizzy escarpments and colossal steeps, with the snow-clad pinnacle, glimpsed between the great spurs, dominating all. The ridge ended at a ledge high up among the cliffs, and in the sheer rock there stood a bronze door, thickly carved with inscriptions that Gordon could not decipher. It was heavy enough to have resisted an attack of artillery.

"This is sacred to Erlik," said Yogok, but he showed about as much reverence as one of the Moham-medans. "Push against the door. Nay; fear not. On my life, there is no trap."

"On your life it is," Gordon assured him grimly, and himself set a shoulder to the door, almost falling as he dismounted.



THE PONDEROUS portal swung inward with a smoothness that showed the antique hinges had recently been oiled. A makeshift torch revealed the entrance to a tunnel, cut in solid rock. A few feet from the door the tunnel opened out like the neck of a bottle, and the flickering torch, held at the entrance, only hinted at the vastness of its dimensions.

"This tunnel runs clear through the mountain," said Yogok. "By dawn we can be out of reach of those who follow, because even if they climb over the mountain by the most direct route, they must go by foot and it will take them all the rest of the night and all of another day. If they skirt the mountain and work their way through the passes of the surrounding hills, it will take them even longer; and their horses are weary, too.

"That is the way I was going to guide Ormond. I was not going to take him through the mountain. But it is the only way of escape for you. There is food here. At certain seasons of the year the monks work here. In that cell there are lamps."

He pointed to a small chamber cut in the rock just inside the doorway. Gordon lighted several of the butter lamps, and gave them to the Turkomans to carry. He dared not follow the course which caution suggested and ride ahead to investigate before he led his men into the tunnel. The pursuers were too close behind them. He must bar the big door and plunge on, trusting the priest's desire to save his own skin.

When the men were all in the tunnel, Yogok directed the barring of the door—giant bronze bars, thick as a man's leg. It took half a dozen of the weakened Turkomans to lift one, but once they were in place, Gordon was certain that nothing short of siege guns could force the ton-heavy door, with its massive bronze sills and jambs set deep in the living rock.

He made Yogok ride between him and Orkhan, the Turkoman holding a lamp. There was no use trusting Yogok, even though the priest was getting some satisfaction out of the thought that he was at least ridding himself of the "goddess" he feared and hated, although it meant foregoing his vengeance on her.

Even with all his faculties occupied in a savage battle to keep from falling senseless with exhaustion,

Gordon found space to be amazed at what the light showed him. He had never dreamed of the existence of such a place. Thirty men could have ridden abreast in the cavernlike passage, and the roof soared out of sight in some places; in others stalactites reflected the light in a thousand scintillant colors.

The floors and walls were as even as man-shaped marble, and Gordon wondered how many centuries had been required for the hand-cutting and smoothing of them. Cells appeared at irregular intervals, cut in the rock at the sides, and presently he saw marks of pick work, and then caught glints of dull yellow.

The light showed him the incredible truth. The tales of Mount Erlik Khan were true. The walls were patterned with veins of gold that could be dug out of the rock with a knife point.

The Turkomans, who smelled loot as vultures smell carrion, woke suddenly out of their daze of fatigue and began to take an almost painfully intense interest.

"This is where the monks get their gold, sahib," said Orkhan, his eyes blazing in the lamplight. "Let me twist the old one's toes for a space, and he will tell us where they have hidden that which they have dug out of the walls."

But "the old one" did not need persuasion. He pointed out a square-hewn chamber in which stood stacks of peculiarly shaped objects that were ingots of virgin gold. In other, larger cells were the primitive contrivances with which they smelted the ore and cast the metal.

"Take what ye will," said Yogok indifferently. "A thousand horses could not carry away the gold we have cast and stored, and we have scarcely dipped into the richness of the veins."

Thin lips were licked greedily, drooping mustaches twisted in emotion, and eyes that burned like hawks' were turned questioningly on Gordon.

"Ye have spare horses," he suggested, and that was enough for them.

After that nothing could have convinced them that everything which had passed had not been planned by Gordon in order to lead them to the gold which was the plunder he had promised them. They loaded the extra ponies until he interfered, to save the animals' strength. Then they hacked off chunks of the soft gold and stuffed their pouches and belts and girdles, and even so they had scarcely diminished the stacks. Some of the raiders lifted up their voices and wept when they saw how much they must leave behind.

"Assuredly," they promised each other, "we shall return with wagons and many horses and secure every crumb of it, *inshallah!*"

"Dogs!" swore Gordon. "Ye have each man a fortune beyond your dreams. Are ye jackals to feast on carrion until your bellies burst? Will ye loiter here until the Kirghiz cross the mountain and cut us off? What of gold then, you crop-eared rogues?"

Of more interest to the American was a cell where barley was stored in leather sacks, and he made the tribesmen load some of the horses with food instead of gold. They grumbled, but they obeyed him. They would obey him now, if he ordered them to ride with him into Jehannum.

Every nerve in his body shrieked for sleep, submerging hunger, but he gnawed a handful of raw barley and flogged his failing powers with the lash of his driving will. Yasmecna drooped in her saddle wearily, but her eyes shone unclouded in the lamplight, and Gordon was dully aware of a deep respect for her that dwarfed even his former admiration.

They rode on through that glittering, dream-palace cavern, the tribesmen munching barley and babbling ecstatically of the joys their gold would buy, and at last they came to a bronze door which was a counter-

part of the one at the other end of the tunnel. It was not barred. Yogok maintained that none but the monks had visited Mount Erlik in centuries. The door swung inward at their efforts and they blinked in the glow of a white dawn.

THEY were looking out on a small ledge from which a narrow trail wound along the edge of a giant escarpment. On one side the land fell away sheer for thousands of feet, so that a stream at the bottom looked like a thread of silver, and on the other a sheer cliff rose for some five hundred feet.

The cliff limited the view to the left, but to the right Gordon could see some of the mountains which flanked Mount Erlik Khan, and the valley far below them wandered southward away to a pass in the distance, a notch in the savage rampart of the hills.

"This is life for you, El Borak," said Yogok, pointing to the pass. "Three miles from the spot where we now stand this trail leads down into the valley where there is water and game and rich grass for the horses. You can follow it southward beyond the pass for three days' journey when you will come into country you know well. It is inhabited by marauding tribes, but they will not attack a party as large as yours. You can be through the pass before the Kirghiz round the mountain, and they will not follow you through it. That is the limit of their country. Now let me go."

"Not yet; I'll release you at the pass. You can make your way back here easily and wait for the Kirghiz, and tell them any lie you want to about their goddess."

Yogok glared angrily at Gordon. The American's eyes were bloodshot, the skin stretched taut over the bones of his face. He looked like a man who had been sweated in hell's fires, and he felt the same way. There was no reason for Yogok's strident objections, except a

desire to get out of the company of those he hated as quickly as possible.

In Gordon's state a man reverts to primitive instincts, and the American held his thrumming nerves in an iron grip to keep from braining the priest with his gun butt. Dispute and importunities were like screaming insults to his struggling brain.

While the priest squawked, and Gordon hesitated between reasoning with him or knocking him down, the Turkomans, inspired by the gold and food, and eager for the trail, began to crowd past him. Half a dozen had emerged on the ledge when Gordon noticed them, and ordering Orkhan to bring Yogok along, he rode past those on the ledge, intending to take the lead as usual. But one of the men was already out to the path, and could neither turn back nor hug the wall close enough to let Gordon by.

The American, perforce, called to him to go ahead, and he would follow, and even as Gordon set his horse to the trail a volley of boulders came thundering down from above. They hit the wretched Turkoman and swept him and his horse off the trail as a broom sweeps a spider from a wall. One of the stones, bouncing from the ledge, hit Gordon's horse and broke its leg, and the beast screamed and toppled over the side after the other.

Gordon threw himself clear as it fell, landed half over the edge, and clawed a desperate way to safety with Yasmeena's screams and the yells of the Turkomans ringing in his ears. There was nothing seen to shoot at, but some of them loosed their rifles anyway, and the volley was greeted by a wild peal of mocking laughter from the cliffs above.

In no way unnerved by his narrow escape, Gordon drove his men back into the shelter of the cave. They were like wolves in a trap, ready to strike blind right

and left, and a dozen tulwars hovered over Yogok's head.

"Slay him! He has led us into a trap! Allah!"

Yogok's face was a green, convulsed mask of fear. He squalled like a tortured cat.

"Nay! I led you swift and sure! The Kirghiz could not have reached this side of the mountain by this time!"

"Were there monks hiding in these cells?" asked Gordon. "They could have sneaked out when they saw us coming in. Is that a monk up there?"

"Nay; as Erlik is my witness! We work the gold three moons in the year; at other times it is death to go near Mount Erlik. I know not who it is."

Gordon ventured out on the path again and was greeted by another shower of stones, which he barely avoided, and a voice yelled high above him:

"You Yankee dog, how do you like that? I've got you now, damn you! Thought I was done for when I fell into that fissure, didn't you? Well, there was a ledge a few feet down that I landed on. You couldn't see it because the sun wasn't high enough to shine down into it. If I'd had a gun I'd have killed you when you looked down. I climbed out after you left."

"Ormond!" snarled Gordon.

"Did you think I hadn't wormed anything out of that monk?" the Englishman yelled. "He told me all about the paths and Mount Erlik after I'd caved in some of his teeth with a gun barrel. I saw old Yogok with you and knew he'd lead you to Erlik. I got here first. I'd have barred the door and locked you out to be butchered by the fellows who're chasing you, but I couldn't lift the bars. But, anyway, I've got you trapped. You can't leave the cave; if you do I'll mash you like insects on the path. I can see you on it, and you can't see me. I'm going to keep you here until the

Kirghiz come up. I've still got Yasmeena's symbol. They'll listen to me.

"I'll tell them Yogok is helping you to kidnap her; they'll kill you all except her. They'll take her back, but I don't care now. I don't need that Kashmiri's money. I've got the secret of Mount Erlik Khan!"

Gordon fell back into the doorway and repeated what the Englishman had said. Yogok turned a shade greener in his fear, and all stared silently at El Borak. His bloodshot gaze traveled over them as they stood blinking, disheveled, and haggard, with lamps paled by the dawn, like ghouls caught above earth by day-break. Grimly he marshaled his straying wits. Gordon had never reached the ultimate limits of his endurance; always he had plumbed a deeper, hidden reservoir of vitality below what seemed the last.

"Is there another way out of here?" he demanded.

Yogok shook his head, chattering again with terror. "No way that men and horses can go."

"What do you mean?"

The priest moved back into the darkness and held a lamp close to the flank of the wall where the tunnel narrowed for the entrance. Rusty bits of metal jutted from the rock.

"Here was once a ladder," he said. "It led far up to a crevice in the wall where long ago one sat to watch the southern pass for invaders. But none has climbed it for many years, and the handholds are rusty and rotten. The crevice opens on the sheer of the outer cliffs, and even if a man reached it, he could scarcely climb down the outside."

"Well, maybe I can pick Ormond off from the crevice," muttered Gordon, his head swimming with the effort of thinking.

Standing still was making infinitely harder his fight to keep awake. The muttering of the Turkomans was a meaningless tangle of sound, and Yasmeena's dark

anxious eyes seemed to be looking at him from a vast distance. He thought he felt her arms cling to him briefly, but he could not be sure. The lights were beginning to swim in a thick mist.

Beating himself into wakefulness by striking his own face with his open hand, he began the climb, a rifle slung to his back. Orkhan was plucking at him, begging to be allowed to make the attempt in his stead, but Gordon shook him off. In his dazed brain was a conviction that the responsibility was his own. He went up like an automaton, slowly, all his muddled faculties concentrating grimly on the task.

Fifty feet up, the light of the lamps ceased to aid him, and he groped upward in the gloom, feeling for the rusty bolts set in the wall. They were so rotten that he dared not put his full weight on any one of them. In some places they were missing and he clung with his fingers in the niches where they had been. Only the slant of the rock enabled him to accomplish the climb at all, and it seemed endless, a hell-born eternity of torture.

The lamps below him were like fireflies in the darkness, and the roof with its clustering stalactites was only a few yards above his head. Then he saw a gleam of light, and an instant later he was crouching in a cleft that opened on the outer air. It was only a couple of yards wide, and not tall enough for a man to stand upright.

He crawled along it for some thirty feet and then looked out on a rugged slant that pitched down to a crest of cliffs, a hundred feet below. He could not see the ledge where the door opened, nor the path that led from it, but he saw a figure crouching among the boulders along the lip of the cliff, and he unslung his rifle.

Ordinarily he could not have missed at that range. But his bloodshot eyes refused to line the sights. Slumber never assails a weary man so fiercely as in the

growing light of dawn. The figure among the rocks below merged and blended fantastically with the scenery, and the sights of the rifle were mere blurs.

Setting his teeth, Gordon pulled the trigger, and the bullet smashed on the rock a foot from Ormond's head. The Englishman dived out of sight among the boulders.

In desperation Gordon slung his rifle and threw a leg over the lip of the cleft. He was certain that Ormond had no firearm. Down below the Turkomans were clamoring like a wolf pack, but his numbed faculties were fully occupied with the task of climbing down the ribbed pitch. He stumbled and fumbled and nearly fell, and at last he did slip and came sliding and tumbling down until his rifle caught on a projection and held him dangling by the strap.

In a red mist he saw Ormond break cover, with a tulwar that he must have found in the cavern, and in a panic lest the Englishman climb up and kill him as he hung helplessly, Gordon braced his feet and elbows against the rock and wrenched savagely, breaking the rifle strap. He plunged down like a plummet, hit the slope, clawed at rocks and knobs, and brought up on shalving stone a dozen feet from the cliff edge, while his rifle, tumbling before him, slid over and was gone.

The fall jolted his numbed nerves back into life again, knocked some of the cobwebs out of his dizzy brain. Ormond was within a few steps of him when he scrambled up, drawing his scimitar. The Englishman was as savage and haggard in appearance as was Gordon, and his eyes blazed with a frenzy that almost amounted to madness.

"Steel to steel now, El Borak!" Ormond gritted. "We'll see if you're the swordsman they say you are!"

ORMOND came with a rush and Gordon met him, fired above his exhaustion by his hate and the stinging frenzy of battle. They fought back and forth along the

cliff edge, with a foot to spare between them and eternity sometimes, until the clangor of the swords wakened the eagles to shrill hysteria.

Ormond fought like a wild man, yet with all the craft the sword masters of his native England had taught him. Gordon fought as he had learned to fight in grim and merciless battles in the hills and the steppes and the deserts. He fought as an Afghan fights, with the furious intensity of onslaught that gathers force like a rising hurricane as it progresses.

Beating on his blade like a smith on an anvil, Gordon drove the Englishman staggering before him, until the man swayed dizzily with his heels over the edge of the cliff.

"Swine!" gasped Ormond with his last breath, and spat in his enemy's face and slashed madly at his head.

"This for Ahmed!" roared Gordon, and his scimitar whirled past Ormond's blade and crunched home.

The Englishman reeled outward, his features suddenly blotted out by blood and brains, and pitched backward into the gulf without a sound.

Gordon sat down on a boulder, suddenly aware of the quivering of his leg muscles. He sat there, his gory blade across his knees and his head sunk in his hands, his brain a black blank, until shouts welling up from below roused him to consciousness.

"Ohai, El Borak! A man with a cleft head has fallen past us into the valley! Art thou safe? We await orders!"

He lifted his head and glanced at the sun which was just rising over the eastern peaks, turning to crimson flame the snow of Mount Erlik Khan. He would have traded all the gold of the monks of Yolgen to be allowed to lie down and sleep for an hour, and climbing up on his stiffened legs that trembled with his weight was a task of appalling magnitude. But his labor was not yet done; there was no rest for him this side of the pass.

Summoning the shreds of his strength, he shouted down to the raiders.

"Get upon the horses and ride, sons of nameless dogs! Follow the trail and I will come along the cliff. I see a place beyond the next bend where I can climb down to the trail. Bring Yogok with you; he has earned his release, but the time is not yet."

"Hurry, El Borak," floated up Yasmeena's golden call. "It is far to Delhi, and many mountains lie between!"

Gordon laughed and sheathed his scimitar, and his laugh sounded like the ghastly mirth of a hyena; below him the Turkomans had taken the road and were already singing a chant improvised in his honor, naming "Son of the Sword" the man who staggered along the cliffs above them, with a face like a grinning skull and feet that left smears of blood on the rock.

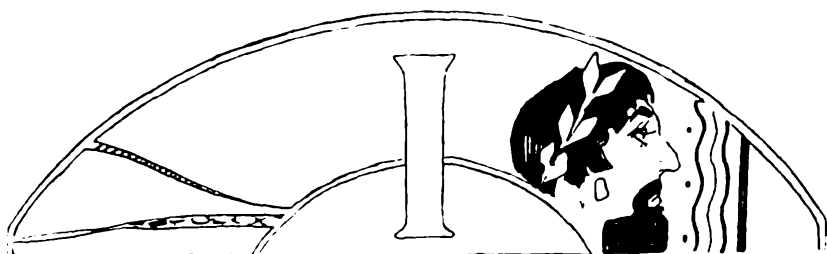




IT WAS the stealthy clink of steel on stone that wakened Gordon. In the dim starlight a shadowy bulk loomed over him and something glinted in the lifted hand. Gordon went into action like a steel spring uncoiling. His left hand checked the descending wrist with its curved knife, and simultaneously he heaved upward and locked his right hand savagely on a hairy throat.

A gurgling gasp was strangled in that throat and Gordon, resisting the other's terrific plunges, hooked a leg about his knee and heaved him over and underneath. There was no sound except the rasp and thud of straining bodies. Gordon fought, as always, in grim silence. No sound came from the straining lips of the man beneath. His right hand writhed in Gordon's grip while his left tore futilely at the wrist whose iron fingers drove deeper and deeper into the throat they grasped. That wrist felt like a mass of woven steel

wires to the weakening fingers that clawed at it. Grimly Gordon maintained his position, driving all the power of his compact shoulders and corded arms into his throttling fingers. He knew it was his life or that of the man who had crept up to stab him in the dark. In that unmapped corner of the Afghan mountains all fights were to the death. The tearing fingers relaxed. A convulsive shudder ran through the great body straining beneath the American. It went limp.



THE · OILED · SILK · PACKAGE

GORDON SLID OFF the corpse, in the deeper shadow of the great rocks among which he had been sleeping. Instinctively he felt under his arm to see if the precious package for which he had staked his life was still safe. Yes, it was there, that flat bundle of papers wrapped in oiled silk, that meant life or death to thousands. He listened. No sound broke the stillness. About him the slopes with their ledges and boulders rose gaunt and black in the starlight. It was the darkness before the dawn.

But he knew that men moved about him, out there among the rocks. His ears, whetted by years in wild places, caught stealthy sounds—the soft rasp of cloth over stones, the faint shuffle of sandalled feet. He could not see them, and he knew they could not see him, among the clustered boulders he had chosen for his sleeping site.

His left hand groped for his rifle, and he drew his

revolver with his right. That short, deadly fight had made no more noise than the silent knifing of a sleeping man might have made. Doubtless his stalkers out yonder were awaiting some signal from the man they had sent in to murder their victim.

Gordon knew who these men were. He knew their leader was the man who had dogged him for hundreds of miles, determined he should not reach India with that silk-wrapped packet. Francis Xavier Gordon was known by repute from Stamboul to the China Sea. The Muhammadans called him El Borak, the Swift, and they feared and respected him. But in Gustav Hunyadi, renegade and international adventurer, Gordon had met his match. And he knew now that Hunyadi, out there in the night, was lurking with his Turkish killers. They had ferreted him out, at last.

Gordon glided out from among the boulders as silently as a great cat. No hillman, born and bred among those crags, could have avoided loose stones more skillfully or picked his way more carefully. He headed southward, because that was the direction in which lay his ultimate goal. Doubtless he was completely surrounded.

His soft native sandals made no noise, and in his dark hillman's garb he was all but invisible. In the pitch-black shadow of an overhanging cliff, he suddenly sensed a human presence ahead of him. A voice hissed, a European tongue framing the Turki words: "Ali! Is that you? Is the dog dead? Why did you not call me?"

Gordon struck savagely in the direction of the voice. His pistol barrel crunched glancingly against a human skull, and a man groaned and crumpled. All about rose a sudden clamor of voices, the rasp of leather on rock. A stentorian voice began shouting, with a note of panic.

Gordon cast stealth to the winds. With a bound he



cleared the writhing body before him, and sped off down the slope. Behind him rose a chorus of yells as the men in hiding glimpsed his shadowy figure racing through the starlight. Jets of orange cut the darkness, but the bullets whined high and wide. Gordon's flying shape was sighted but an instant, then the shadowy gulfs of the night swallowed it up. His enemies raved like foiled wolves in their bewildered rage. Once again their prey had slipped like an eel through their fingers and was gone.

So thought Gordon as he raced across the plateau beyond the clustering cliffs. They would be hot after him, with hillmen who could trail a wolf across naked rocks, but with the start he had—. Even with the thought the earth gaped blackly before him. Even his steel-trap quickness could not save him. His grasping hands caught only thin air as he plunged downward, to strike his head with stunning force at the bottom.

When he regained his senses a chill dawn was whitening the sky. He sat up groggily and felt his head, where a large lump was clotted with dried blood. It was only by chance that his neck was not broken. He had fallen into a ravine, and during the precious time he should have employed in flight, he was lying senseless among the rocks at the bottom.

Again he felt for the packet under his native shirt, though he knew it was fastened there securely. Those papers were his death-warrant, which only his skill and wit could prevent being executed. Men had laughed when Francis Xavier Gordon had warned them that the devil's own stew was bubbling in Central Asia, where a satanic adventurer was dreaming of an out-law empire.

To prove his assertion, Gordon had gone into Turkestan, in the guise of of a wandering Afghan. Years spent in the Orient had given him the ability to pass himself for a native anywhere. He had secured proof

no one could ignore or deny, but he had been recognized at last. He had fled for his life, and for more than his life, then. And Hunyadi, the renegade who plotted the destruction of nations, was hot on his heels. He had followed Gordon across the steppes, through the foothills, and up into the mountains where he had thought at last to throw him off. But he had failed. The Hungarian was a human bloodhound. Wary, too, as shown by his sending his craftiest slayer in to strike a blow in the dark.

Gordon found his rifle and began the climb out of the ravine. Under his left arm was proof that would make certain officials wake up and take steps to prevent the atrocious thing that Gustav Hunyadi planned. The proof was in the form of letters to various Central Asian chiefs, signed and sealed with the Hungarian's own hand. They revealed his whole plot to embroil Central Asia in a religious war and send howling hordes of fanatics against the Indian border. It was a plan for plundering on a staggering scale. That package *must* reach Fort Ali Masjid! With all his iron will Francis Xavier Gordon was determined it should. With equal resolution Gustav Hunyadi was determined it should not. In the clash of two such indomitable temperaments, kingdoms shake and death reaps a red harvest.

Dirt crumbled and pebbles rattled down as Gordon worked his way up the sloping side of the ravine. But presently he clambered over the edge and cast a quick look about him. He was on a narrow plateau, pitched among giant slopes which rose somberly above it. To the south showed the mouth of a narrow gorge, walled by rocky cliffs. In that direction he hurried.

He had not gone a dozen steps when a rifle cracked behind him. Even as the wind of the bullet fanned his cheek, Gordon dropped flat behind a boulder, a sense

of futility tugging at his heart. He could never escape Hunyadi. This chase would end only when one of them was dead. In the increasing light he saw figures moving among the boulders along the slopes to the northwest of the plateau. He had lost his chance of escaping under cover of darkness, and now it looked like a finish fight.

He thrust forward his rifle barrel. Too much to hope that that blind blow in the dark had killed Hunyadi. The man had as many lives as a cat. A bullet splattered on the boulder close to his elbow. He had seen a tongue of flame lick out, marking the spot where the sniper lurked. He watched those rocks, and when a head and part of an arm and shoulder came up with a rifle, Gordon fired. It was a long shot, but the man reared upright and pitched forward across the rock that had sheltered him.

More bullets came, spattering Gordon's refuge. Up on the slopes, where the big boulders poised breath-takingly, he saw his enemies moving like ants, wriggling from ledge to ledge. They were spread out in a wide ragged semi-circle, trying to surround him again. He did not have enough ammunition to stop them. He dared shoot only when fairly certain of scoring a hit. He dared not make a break for the gorge behind him. He would be riddled before he could reach it. It looked like trail's end for him, and while Gordon had faced death too often to fear it greatly, the thought that those papers would never reach their destination filled him with black despair.

A bullet whining off his boulder from a new angle made him crouch lower, seeking the marksman. He glimpsed a white turban, high up on the slope, above the others. From that position the Turk could drop bullets directly into Gordon's covert.

The American could not shift his position, because a dozen other rifles nearer at hand were covering it; and

he could not stay where he was. One of those dropping slugs would find him sooner or later. But the Ottoman decided that he saw a still better position, and risked a shift, trusting to the long uphill range. He did not know Gordon as Hunyadi knew him.

The Hungarian, further down the slope, yelled a fierce command, but the Turk was already in motion, headed for another ledge, his garments flapping about him. Gordon's bullet caught him in mid-stride. With a wild cry he staggered, fell headlong and crashed against a poised boulder. He was a heavy man, and the impact of his hurtling body toppled the rock from its unstable base. It rolled down the slope, dislodging others as it came. Dirt rattled in widening streams about it.

Men began recklessly to break cover. Gordon saw Hunyadi spring up and run obliquely across the slope, out of the path of the sliding rocks. The tall supple figure was unmistakable, even in Turkish garb. Gordon fired and missed, as he always seemed to miss the man, and then there was no time to fire again. The whole slope was in motion now, thundering down in a bellowing, grinding torrent of stones and dirt and boulders. The Turks were fleeing after Hunyadi, screaming: "Ya Allah!"

Gordon sprang up and raced for the mouth of the gorge. He did not look back. He heard above the roaring, the awful screams that marked the end of men caught and crushed and ground to bloody shreds under the rushing tons of shale and stone. He dropped his rifle. Every ounce of extra burden counted now. A deafening roar was in his ears as he gained the mouth of the gorge and flung himself about the beetling jut of the cliff. He crouched there, flattened against the wall, and through the gorge mouth roared a welter of dirt and rocks, boulders bouncing and tumbling, rebounding thunderously from the sides and hurtling

on down the sloping pass. Yet, it was a only a trickle of the avalanche which was diverted into the gorge. The main bulk of it thundered on down the mountain.



THE RESCUE OF BARDYLIS OF ATTALUS

GORDON PULLED AWAY from the cliff that had sheltered him. He stood knee deep in loose dirt and broken stones. A flying splinter of stone had cut his face. The roar of the landslide was followed by an unearthly silence. Looking back on to the plateau, he saw a vast litter of broken earth, shale and rocks. Here and there an arm or a leg protruded, bloody and twisted, to mark where a human victim had been caught by the torrent. Of Hunyadi and the survivors there was no sign.

But Gordon was a fatalist where the satanic Hungarian was concerned. He felt quite sure that Hunyadi had survived, and would be upon his trail again as soon as he could collect his demoralized followers. It was likely that he would recruit the natives of these hills to his service. The man's power among the followers of Islam was little short of marvelous.

So Gordon turned hurriedly down the gorge. Rifle, pack of supplies, all were lost. He had only the garments on his body and the pistol at his hip. Starvation in these barren mountains was a haunting threat, if he escaped being butchered by the wild tribes which inhabited them. There was about one chance in ten thousand of his ever getting out alive. But he had

known it was a desperate quest when he started, and long odds had never balked Francis Xavier Gordon, once of El Paso, Texas, and now for years soldier of fortune in the outlands of the world.

The gorge twisted and bent between tortuous walls. The split-off arm of the avalanche had quickly spent its force there, but Gordon still saw the slanting floor littered with boulders which had tumbled down from the higher levels. And suddenly he stopped short, his pistol snapping to a level.

On the ground before him lay a man such as he had never seen in the Afghan mountains or elsewhere. He was young, but tall and strong, clad in short silk breeches, tunic and sandals, and girdled with a broad belt which supported a curved sword.

His hair caught Gordon's attention. Blue eyes, such as the youth had, were not uncommon in the hills. But his hair was yellow, bound about his temples with a band of red cloth, and falling in a square-cut mane nearly to his shoulders. He was clearly no Afghan. Gordon remembered tales he had heard of a tribe living somewhere in these mountains who were neither Afghans nor Muhammadans. Had he stumbled upon a member of that legendary race?

The youth was vainly trying to draw his sword. He was pinned down by a boulder which had evidently caught him as he raced for the shelter of the cliff.

"Slay me and be done with it, you Moslem dog!" he gritted in Pushtu.

"I won't harm you," answered Gordon. "I'm no Moslem. Lie still. I'll help you if I can. I have no quarrel with you."

The heavy stone lay across the youth's leg in such a way that he could not extricate the member.

"Is your leg broken?" Gordon asked.

"I think not. But if you move the stone it will grind it to shreds."

Gordon saw that he spoke the truth. A depression on the under side of the stone had saved the youth's limb, while imprisoning it. If he rolled the boulder either way, it would crush the member.

"I'll have to lift it straight up," he grunted.

"You can never do it," said the youth despairingly. "Ptolemy himself could scarcely lift it, and you are not nearly so big as he."

Gordon did not pause to inquire who Ptolemy might be, nor to explain that strength is not altogether a matter of size alone. His own thews were like masses of knit steel wires.

Yet he was not at all sure that he could lift that boulder, which, while not so large as many which had rolled down the gorge, was yet bulky enough to make the task look dubious. Straddling the prisoner's body, he braced his legs wide, spread his arms and gripped the big stone. Putting all his corded sinews and his scientific knowledge of weight-lifting into his effort, he uncoiled his strength in a smooth, mighty expansion of power.

His heels dug into the dirt, the veins in his temples swelled, and unexpected knots of muscles sprang out on his straining arms. But the great stone came up steadily without a jerk or waver, and the man on the ground drew his leg clear and rolled away.

Gordon let the stone fall and stepped back, shaking the perspiration from his face. The other worked his skinned, bruised leg gingerly, then looked up and extended his hand in a curiously un-Oriental gesture.

"I am Bardylis of Attalus," he said. "My life is yours!"

"Men call me El Borak," answered Gordon, taking his hand. They made a strong contrast: the tall, rangy youth in his strange garb, with his white skin and yellow hair, and the American, shorter, more compactly built, in his tattered Afghan garments, and his

sun-darkened skin. Gordon's hair was straight and black as an Indian's, and his eyes were black as his hair.

"I was hunting on the cliffs," said Bardylis. "I heard shots and was going to investigate them, when I heard the roar of the avalanche and the gorge was filled with flying rocks. You are no Pathan, despite your name. Come to my village. You look like a man who is weary and has lost his way."

"Where is your village?"

"Yonder, down the gorge and beyond the cliffs." Bardylis pointed southward. Then, looking over Gordon's shoulder, he cried out. Gordon wheeled. High up on the beetling gorge wall, a turbaned head was poked from behind a ledge. A dark face stared down wildly. Gordon ripped out his pistol with a snarl, but the face vanished and he heard a frantic voice yelling in guttural *Turki*. Other voices answered, among which the American recognized the strident accents of Gustav Hunyadi. The pack was at his heels again. Undoubtedly they had seen Gordon take refuge in the gorge, and as soon as the boulders creased tumbling, had traversed the torn slope and followed the cliffs where they would have the advantage of the man below.

But Gordon did not pause to ruminate. Even as the turbaned head vanished, he wheeled with a word to his companion, and darted around the next bend in the canyon. Bardylis followed without question, limping on his bruised leg, but moving with sufficient alacrity. Gordon heard his pursuers shouting on the cliff above and behind him, heard them crashing recklessly through stunted bushes, dislodging pebbles as they ran, heedless of everything except their desire to sight their quarry.

Although the pursuers had one advantage, the fugitives had another. They could follow the slightly

slanting floor of the gorge more swiftly than the others could run along the uneven cliffs, with their broken edges and jutting ledges. They had to climb and scramble, and Gordon heard their maledictions growing fainter in the distance behind him. When they emerged from the further mouth of the gorge, they were far in advance of Hunyadi's killers.

But Gordon knew that the respite was brief. He looked about him. The narrow gorge had opened out onto a trail which ran straight along the crest of a cliff that fell away sheer three hundred feet into a deep valley, hemmed in on all sides by gigantic precipices. Gordon looked down and saw a stream winding among dense trees far below, and further on, what seemed to be stone buildings among the groves.

Bardylis pointed to the latter.

"There is my village!" he said excitedly. "If we could get into the valley we would be safe! This trail leads to the pass at the southern end, but it is five miles distant!"

Gordon shook his head. The trail ran straight along the top of the cliff and afforded no cover. "They'll run us down and shoot us like rats at long range, if we keep to this path."

"There is one other way!" cried Bardylis. "Down the cliff, at this very point! It is a secret way, and none but a man of my people has ever followed it, and then only when hard pressed. There are handholds cut into the rock. Can you climb down?"

"I'll try," answered Gordon, sheathing his pistol. To try to go down those towering cliffs looked like suicide, but it was sure death to try to outrun Hunyadi's rifles along the trail. At any minute he expected the Magyar and his men to break cover.

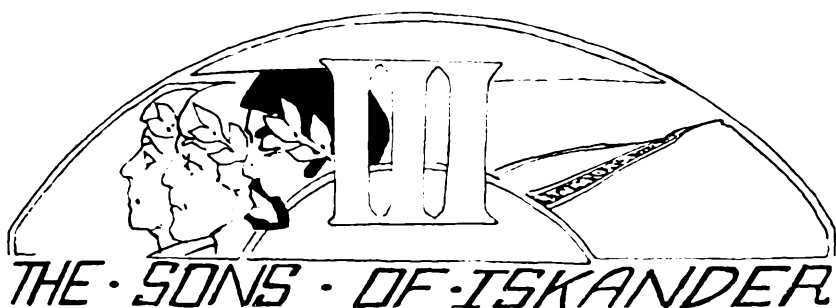
"I will go first and guide you," said Bardylis rapidly, kicking off his sandals and letting himself over the

cliff edge. Gordon did likewise and followed him. Clinging to the sharp lip of the precipice, Gordon saw a series of small holes pitting the rock. He began the descent slowly, clinging like a fly to a wall. It was hair-raising work, and the only thing that made it possible at all was the slight convex slant of the cliff at that point. Gordon had made many a desperate climb during his career, but never one which put such strain on nerve and thew. Again and again only the grip of a finger stood between him and death. Below him Bardylis toiled downward, guiding and encouraging him, until the youth finally dropped to the earth and stood looking tensely up at the man above him.

Then he shouted, with a note of strident fear in his voice. Gordon, still twenty feet from the bottom, craned his neck upward. High above him he saw a bearded face peering down at him, convulsed with triumph. Deliberately the Turk sighted downward with a pistol, then laid it aside and caught up a heavy stone, leaning far over the edge to aim its downward course. Clinging with toes and nails, Gordon drew and fired upward with the same motion. Then he flattened himself desperately against the cliff and clung on.

The man above screamed and pitched headfirst over the brink. The rock rushed down, striking Gordon a glancing blow on the shoulder, then the writhing body hurtled past and struck with a sickening concussion on the earth below. A voice shouting furiously high above announced the presence of Hunyadi at last, and Gordon slid and tumbled recklessly the remaining distance, and, with Bardylis, ran for the shelter of the trees.

A glance backward and upward showed him Hunyadi crouching on the cliff, leveling a rifle, but the next instant Gordon and Bardylis were out of sight, and Hunyadi, apparently dreading an answering shot from the trees, made a hasty retreat with the four Turks who were the survivors of his party.



"YOU SAVED my life when you showed me that path," said Gordon.

Bardylis smiled. "Any man of Attalus could have shown you the path, which we call the Road of the Eagles. But only a hero could have followed it. From what land comes my brother?"

"From the west," answered Gordon; "from the land of America, beyond Frankistan and the sea."

Bardylis shook his head. "I have never heard of it. But come with me. My people are yours henceforth."

As they moved through the trees, Gordon scanned the cliffs in vain for some sign of his enemies. He felt certain that neither Hunyadi, bold as he was, nor any of his companions would try to follow them down "the Road of the Eagles." They were not mountaineers. They were more at home in the saddle than on a hill path. They would seek some other way into the valley. He spoke his thoughts to Bardylis.

"They will find death," answered the youth grimly. "The Pass of the King, at the southern end of the valley, is the only entrance. Men guard it with matchlocks night and day. The only strangers who enter the Valley of Iskander are traders and merchants with pack-mules."

Gordon inspected his companion curiously, aware of a certain tantalizing sensation of familiarity he could not place.

"Who are your people?" he asked. "You are not an Afghan. You do not look like an Oriental at all."

"We are the Sons of Iskander," answered Bardylis. "When the great conqueror came through these mountains long ago, he built the city we call Attalus, and left hundreds of his soldiers and their women in it. Iskander marched westward again, and after a long while word came that he was dead and his empire divided. But the people of Iskander abode here, unconquered. Many times we have slaughtered the Afghan dogs who came against us."

Light came to Gordon, illuminating that misplaced familiarity. Iskander—Alexander the Great, who conquered this part of Asia and left colonies behind him. This boy's profile was classic Grecian, such as Gordon had seen in sculptured marble, and the names he spoke were Grecian. Undoubtedly he was the descendant of some Macedonian soldier who had followed the Great Conqueror on his invasion of the East.

To test the matter, he spoke to Bardylis in ancient Greek, one of the many languages, modern and obsolete, he had picked up in his varied career. The youth cried out with pleasure.

"You speak our tongue!" he exclaimed, in the same language. "Not in a thousand years has a stranger come to us with our own speech on his lips. We converse with the Moslems in their own tongue, and they know nothing of ours. Surely, you too, are a Son of Iskander?"

Gordon shook his head, wondering how he could explain his knowledge of the tongue to this youth who knew nothing of the world outside the hills.

"My ancestors were neighbors of the people of Alexander," he said at last. "So, many of my people speak their language."

They were approaching the stone roofs which shone

through the trees, and Gordon saw that Bardylis's "village" was a substantial town, surrounded by a wall. It was so plainly the work of long dead Grecian architects that he felt like a man who had wandered into a past and forgotten age.

Outside the walls, men tilled the thin soil with primitive implements, and herded sheep and cattle. A few horses grazed along the bank of the stream which meandered through the valley. All the men, like Bardylis, were tall and fair-haired. They dropped their work and came running up, staring at the black-haired stranger in hostile surprise, until Bardylis reassured them.

"It is the first time any but a captive or a trader has entered the valley in centuries," said Bardylis to Gordon. "Say nothing till I bid you. I wish to surprise my people with your knowledge. Zeus, they will gape when they hear a stranger speak to them in their own tongue!"

The gate in the wall hung open and unguarded, and Gordon noticed that the wall itself was in a poor state of repair. Bardylis remarked that the guard in the narrow pass at the end of the valley was sufficient protection, and that no hostile force had ever reached the city itself. They passed through and walked along a broad paved street, in which yellow-haired people in tunics, men, women and children, went about their tasks much like the Greeks of two thousand years ago, among buildings which were duplicates of the structures of ancient Athens.

A crowd quickly formed about them, but Bardylis, bursting with glee and importance, gave them no satisfaction. He went straight toward a large edifice near the center of the town and mounting the broad steps, came into a large chamber where several men, more richly dressed than the common people, sat casting dice on a small table before them. The crowd swarmed

in after them, and thronged the doorway eagerly. The chiefs ceased their dice game, and one, a giant with a commanding air, demanded: "What do you wish, Bardylis? Who is this stranger?"

"A friend of Attalus, Ptolemy, king of the valley of Iskander," answered Bardylis. "He speaks the tongue of Iskander!"

"What tale is this?" harshly demanded the giant.

"Let them hear, brother!" Bardylis directed triumphantly.

"I come in peace," said Gordon briefly, in archaic Greek. "I am called El Borak, but I am no Moslem."

A murmur of surprise went up from the throng, and Ptolemy fingered his chin and scowled suspiciously. He was a magnificently built man, clean-shaven like all his tribesmen, and handsome, but his visage was moody.

He listened impatiently while Bardylis related the circumstances of his meeting with Gordon, and when he told of the American lifting the stone that pinned him down, Ptolemy frowned and involuntarily flexed his own massive thews. He seemed ill-pleased at the approval with which the people openly greeted the tale. Evidently these descendants of Grecian athletes had as much admiration for physical perfection as had their ancient ancestors, and Ptolemy was vain of his prowess.

"How could he lift such a stone?" the king broke in. "He is of no great size. His head would scarcely top my chin."

"He is mighty beyond his stature, O king," retorted Bardylis. "Here is the bruise on my leg to prove I tell the truth. He lifted the stone I could not move, and he came down the Road of the Eagles, which few even among the Attalans have dared. He has traveled far and fought men, and now he would feast and rest."

"See to it then," grunted Ptolemy contemptuously,

turning back to his dice game. "If he is a Moslem spy, your head shall answer for it."

"I stake my head gladly on his honesty, O king!" answered Bardylis proudly. Then, taking Gordon's arm, he said softly, "Come my friend. Ptolemy is short of patience and scant of courtesy. Pay no heed to him. I will take you to the house of my father."

As they pushed their way through the crowd, Gordon's gaze picked out an alien countenance among the frank, blond faces—a thin, swarthy visage, whose black eyes gleamed avidly on the American. The man was a Tajik, with a bundle on his back. When he saw he was being scrutinized he smirked and bobbed his head. There was something familiar about the gesture.

"Who is that man?" Gordon asked.

"Abdullah, a Moslem dog whom we allow to enter the valley with beads and mirrors and such trinkets as our women love. We trade ore and wine and skins for them."

Gordon remembered the fellow now—a shifty character who used to hang around Peshawur, and was suspected of smuggling rifles up the Khyber Pass. But when he turned and looked back, the dark face had vanished in the crowd. However, there was no reason to fear Abdullah, even if the man recognized him. The Tajik could not know of the papers he carried. Gordon felt that the people of Attalus were friendly to the friend of Bardylis, though the youth had plainly roused Ptolemy's jealous vanity by his praise of Gordon's strength.

Bardylis conducted Gordon down the street to a large stone house with a pillared portico, where he proudly displayed his friend to his father, a venerable patriarch called Perdiccas, and his mother, a tall, stately woman, well along in years. The Attalans certainly did not keep their women in seclusion like the Moslems. Gordon saw Bardylis' sisters, robust blond

beauties, and his young brother. The American could scarcely suppress a smile at the strangeness of it all, being ushered into the every-day family life of two thousand years ago. These people were definitely not barbarians. They were lower, undoubtedly, in the cultural scale than their Hellenic ancestors, but they were still more highly civilized than their fierce Afghan neighbors.

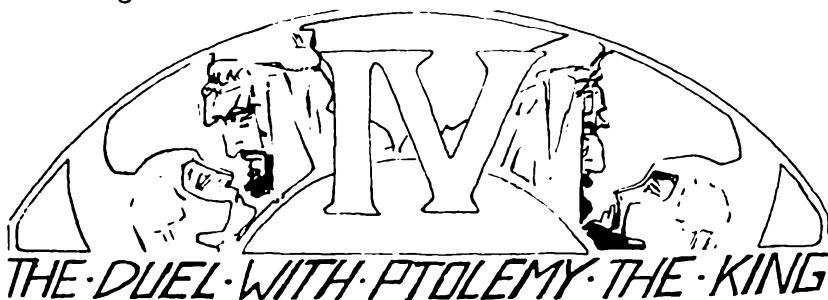
The interest in their guest was genuine, but none save Bardylis showed much interest in the world outside their valley. Presently the youth led Gordon into an inner chamber and set food and wine before him. The American ate and drank ravenously, suddenly aware of the lean days that had preceded this feast. While he ate, Bardylis talked, but he did not speak of the men who had been pursuing Gordon. Evidently he supposed them to have been Afghans of the surrounding hills, whose hostility was proverbial. Gordon learned that no man of Attalus had ever been more than a day's journey away from the valley. The ferocity of the hill tribes all about them had isolated them from the world completely.

When Gordon at last expressed a desire for sleep, Bardylis left him alone, assuring him that he would not be disturbed. The American was somewhat disturbed to find that there was no door to his chamber, merely a curtain drawn across an archway. Bardylis had said there were no thieves in Attalus, but caution was so much a natural part of Gordon that he found himself a prey to uneasiness. The room opened onto a corridor, and the corridor, he believed, gave onto an outer door. The people of Attalus apparently did not find it necessary to safeguard their dwellings. But though a native could sleep in safety, that might not apply to a stranger.

Finally Gordon drew aside the couch which formed the main piece of furniture for the chamber, and mak-

ing sure no spying eyes were on him, he worked loose one of the small stone blocks which composed the wall. Taking the silk-bound packet from his shirt, he thrust it into the aperture, pushed back the stone as far as it would go, and replaced the couch.

Stretching himself, then, upon the couch, he fell to evolving plans for escape with his life and those papers which meant so much to the peace of Asia. He was safe enough in the valley, but he knew Hunyadi would wait for him outside with the patience of a cobra. He could not stay here forever. He would scale the cliffs some dark night and bolt for it. Hunyadi would undoubtedly have all the tribes in the hills after him, but he would trust to luck and his good right arm, as he had so often before. The wine he had drunk was potent. Weariness after the long flight weighted his limbs. Gordon's meditations merged into dream. He slept deeply and long.



WHEN GORDON AWOKE he was in utter darkness. He knew that he had slept for many hours, and night had fallen. Silence reigned over the house, but he had been awakened by the soft swish of the curtains over the doorway.

He sat up on his couch and asked: "Is that you, Bardylis?"

A voice grunted, "Yes." Even as he was electrified by the realization that the voice was *not* that of Bardylis, something crashed down on his head, and a deeper blackness, shot with fire-sparks, engulfed him.

When he regained consciousness, a torch dazzled his eyes, and in its glow he saw three men—burly, yellow-haired men of Attalus with faces more stupid and brutish than any he had yet seen. He was lying on a stone slab in a bare chamber, whose crumbling, cobwebbed walls were vaguely illumined by the gutturing torch. His arms were bound, but not his legs. The sound of a door opening made him crane his neck, and he saw a stooped, vulture-like figure enter the room. It was Abdullah, the Tajik.

He looked down on the American with his rat-like features twisted in a venomous grin.

“Low lies the terrible El Borak!” he taunted. “Fool! I knew you the instant I saw you in the palace of Ptolemy.”

“You have no feud with me,” growled Gordon.

“A friend of mine has,” answered the Tajik. “That is nothing to me, but it shall gain me profit. It is true you have never harmed me, but I have always feared you. So when I saw you in the city, I gathered my goods and hastened to depart, not knowing what you did here. But beyond the pass I met the Feringhi Hunyadi, and he asked me if I had seen you in the valley of Iskander whither you had fled to escape him. I answered that I had, and he urged me to help him steal into the valley and take from you certain documents he said you stole from him.

“But I refused, knowing that these Attalan devils would kill me if I tried to smuggle a stranger into Iskander, and Hunyadi went back into the hills with his four Turks, and the horde of ragged Afghans he has made his friends and allies. When he had gone I returned to the valley, telling the guardsmen at the pass that I feared the Pathans.

“I persuaded these three men to aid me in capturing you. None will know what became of you, and Ptolemy will not trouble himself about you, because he

is jealous of your strength. It is an old tradition that the king of Attalus must be the strongest man in the city. Ptolemy would have killed you himself, in time. But I will attend to that. I do not wish to have you on my trail, after I have taken from you the papers Hunyadi wishes. He shall have them ultimately—if he is willing to pay enough!" He laughed, a high, cackling laugh, and turned to the stolid Attalans. "Did you search him?"

"We found nothing," a giant rumbled.

Abdullah tck-tck'ed his teeth in annoyance.

"You do not know how to search a Feringhi. Here, I will do it myself."

He ran a practiced hand over his captive, scowling as his search was unrewarded. He tried to feel under the American's arm-pits, but Gordon's arms were bound so closely to his sides that this was impossible.

Abdullah frowned worriedly, and drew a curved dagger.

"Cut loose his arms," he directed, "then all three of you lay hold on him; it is like letting a leopard out of his cage."

Gordon made no resistance and was quickly spread-eagled on the slab, with a big Attalan at each arm and one on his legs. They held him closely, but seemed skeptical of Abdullah's repeated warnings concerning the stranger's strength.

The Tajik again approached his prisoner, lowering his knife as he reached out. With a dynamic release of coiled steel muscles, Gordon wrenched his legs free from the grasp of the careless Attalan and drove his heels into Abdullah's breast. Had his feet been booted they would have caved in the Tajik's breast bone. As it was, the merchant shot backward with an agonized grunt, and struck the floor flat on his shoulders.

Gordon had not paused. That same terrific lunge had torn his left arm free, and heaving up on the slab,

he smashed his left fist against the jaw of the man who gripped his right arm. The impact was that of a caulking hammer, and the Attalan went down like a butchered ox. The other two lunged in, hands grasping. Gordon threw himself over the slab to the floor on the other side, and as one of the warriors lunged around it, he caught the Attalan's wrist, wheeled, jerking the arm over his shoulder, and hurled the man bodily over his head. The Attalan struck the floor head-first with an impact that knocked wind and consciousness out of him together.

The remaining kidnapper was more wary. Seeing the terrible strength and blinding speed of his smaller foe, he drew a long knife and came in cautiously, seeking an opportunity for a mortal thrust. Gordon fell back, putting the slab between himself and that glimmering blade, while the other circled warily after him. Suddenly the American stooped and ripped a similar knife from the belt of the man he had first felled. As he did so, the Attalan gave a roar, cleared the slab with a lion-like bound, and slashed in mid-air at the stooping American.

Gordon crouched still lower and the gleaming blade whistled over his head. The man hit the floor feet-first, off balance, and tumbled forward, full into the knife that swept up in Gordon's hand. A strangled cry was wrung from the Attalan's lips as he felt himself impaled on the long blade, and he dragged Gordon down with him in his death struggles.

Tearing free from his weakening embrace, Gordon rose, his garments smeared with his victim's blood, the red knife in his hand. Abdullah staggered up with a croaking cry, his face green with pain. Gordon snarled like a wolf and sprang toward him, all his murderous passion fully roused. But the sight of that dripping knife and the savage mask of Gordon's face galvanized the Tajik. With a scream he sprang for the

door, knocking the torch from its socket as he passed. It hit the floor, scattering sparks, and plunging the room into darkness, and Gordon caromed blindly into the wall.

When he righted himself and found the door, the room was empty except for himself and the Attalans, dead or senseless.

Emerging from the chamber, he found himself in a narrow street, with the stars fading for dawn. The building he had just quitted was dilapidated and obviously deserted. Down the narrow way he saw the house of Perdiccas. So he had not been carried far. Evidently his abductors had anticipated no interference. He wondered how much of a hand Bardylis had had in the plot. He did not like to think that the youth had betrayed him. But in any event, he would have to return to the house of Perdiccas, to obtain the packet he had concealed in the wall. He went down the street, still feeling a bit sick and giddy from that blow that had knocked him senseless, now that the fire of battle had cooled in his veins. The street was deserted. It seemed, indeed, more like an alley than a street, running between the back of the houses.

As he approached the house, he saw someone running toward him. It was Bardylis, and he threw himself on Gordon with a cry of relief that was not feigned.

"Oh, my brother!" he exclaimed. "What has happened? I found your chamber empty a short time ago, and blood on your couch. Are you unhurt? Nay, there is a cut upon your scalp!"

Gordon explained in a few words, saying nothing of the letters. He allowed Bardylis to suppose that Abdullah had been a personal enemy, bent on revenge. He trusted the youth now, but there was no need to disclose the truth of the packet.

Bardylis whitened with fury. "What a shame upon my house!" he cried. "Last night that dog Abdullah made my father a present of a great jug of wine, and we all drank except yourself, who were slumbering. I know now the wine was drugged. We slept like dogs.

"Because you were our guest, I posted a man at each outer door last night, but they fell asleep because of the wine they had drunk. A few minutes ago, searching for you, I found the servant who was posted at the door which opens into this alley from the corridor that runs past your chamber. His throat had been cut. It was easy for them to creep along that corridor and into your chamber while we slept."

Back in the chamber, while Bardylis went to fetch fresh garments, Gordon retrieved the packet from the wall and stowed it under his belt. In his waking hours he preferred to keep it on his person.

Bardylis returned then with the breeches, sandals and tunic of the Attalans, and while Gordon donned them, gazed in admiration at the American's bronzed and sinewy torso, devoid as it was of the slightest trace of surplus flesh.

Gordon had scarcely completed his dressing when voices were heard without, the tramp of men resounded through the hall, and a group of yellow-haired warriors appeared at the doorway, with swords at their sides. Their leader pointed to Gordon, and said: "Ptolemy commands that this man appear at once before him, in the hall of justice."

"What is this?" exclaimed Bardylis. "El Borak is my guest!"

"It is not my part to say," answered the chief. "I but carry out the commands of our king."

Gordon laid a restraining hand on Bardylis's arm. "I will go. I want to see what business Ptolemy has with me."

"I, too, will go," said Bardylis, with a snap of his

jaws. "What this portends I do not know. I do know that El Borak is my friend."

The sun was not yet rising as they strode down the white street toward the palace, but people were already moving about, and many of them followed the procession.

Mounting the broad steps of the palace, they entered a wide hall, flanked with lofty columns. At the other end there were more steps, wide and curving, leading up to a dais on which, in a throne-like marble chair, sat the king of Attalus, sullen as ever. A number of his chiefs sat on stone benches on either side of the dais, and the common people ranged themselves along the wall, leaving a wide space clear before the throne.

In this open space crouched a vulture-like figure. It was Abdullah, his eyes shining with hate and fear, and before him lay the corpse of the man Gordon had killed in the deserted house. The other two kidnappers stood near by, their bruised features sullen and ill at ease.

Gordon was conducted into the open space before the dais, and the guards fell back on either side of him. There was little formality. Ptolemy motioned to Abdullah and said: "Make your charge."

Abdullah sprang up and pointed a skinny finger in Gordon's face.

"I accuse this man of murder!" he screeched. "This morning before dawn he attacked me and my friends while we slept, and slew him who lies there. The rest of us barely escaped with our lives!"

A mutter of surprise and anger rose from the throng. Ptolemy turned his somber stare on Gordon.

"What have you to say?"

"He lies," answered the American impatiently. "I killed that man, yes—"

He was interrupted by a fierce cry from the people,



IN THIS OPEN SPACE
CROUCHED A VULTURE-
LIKE FIGURE

who began to surge menacingly forward, to be thrust back by the guards.

"I only defended my life," said Gordon angrily, not relishing his position of defendant. "That Tajik dog and three others, that dead man and those two standing there, slipped in my chamber last night as I slept in the house of Perdiccas, knocked me senseless and carried me away to rob and kill me."

"Aye!" cried Bardylis wrathfully. "And they slew one of my father's servants while he slept."

At that the murmur of the mob changed, and they halted in uncertainty.

"A lie!" screamed Abdullah, fired to recklessness by avarice and hate. "Bardylis is bewitched! El Borak is a wizard! How else could he speak your tongue?"

The crowd recoiled abruptly, and some made furtive signs to avert conjury. The Attalans were as superstitious as their ancestors. Bardylis had drawn his sword, and his friends rallied about him, clean-cut, rangy youngsters, quivering like hunting dogs in their eagerness.

"Wizard or man!" roared Bardylis, "he is my brother, and no man touches him save at peril of his head!"

"He is a wizard!" screamed Abdullah, foam dabbling his beard. "I know him of old! Beware of him! He will bring madness and ruin upon Attalus! On his body he bears a scroll with magic inscriptions, wherein lies his necromantic power! Give that scroll to me, and I will take it afar from Attalus and destroy it where it can do no harm. Let me prove I do not lie! Hold him while I search him, and I will show you."

"Let no man dare touch El Borak!" challenged Bardylis. Then from his throne rose Ptolemy, a great menacing image of bronze, somber and awe-inspiring. He strode down the steps, and men shrank back from his bleak eyes. Bardylis stood his ground, as if ready to defy even his terrible king, but Gordon drew the lad

• PTOLEMY • THE • KING • OF • ATTALUS •



aside. El Borak was not one to stand quietly by while someone else defended him.

"It is true," he said without heat, "that I have a packet of papers in my garments. But it is also true that it has nothing to do with witchcraft, and that I will kill the man who tries to take it from me."

At that Ptolemy's brooding impassiveness vanished in a flame of passion.

"Will you defy even me?" he roared, his eyes blazing, his great hands working convulsively. "Do you deem yourself already king of Attalus? You black-haired dog, I will kill you with my naked hands! Back, and give us space!"

His sweeping arms hurled men right and left, and roaring like a bull, he hurled himself on Gordon. So swift and violent was his attack that Gordon was unable to avoid it. They met breast to breast, and the smaller man was hurled backward, and to his knee. Ptolemy plunged over him, unable to check his velocity, and then, locked in a death-grapple they ripped and tore, while the people surged yelling about them.

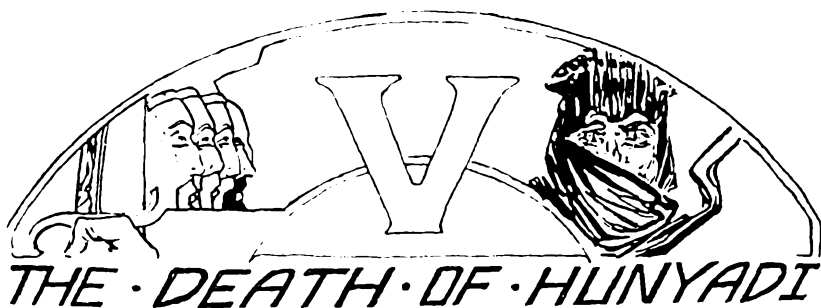
Not often did El Borak find himself opposed by a man stronger than himself. But the king of Attalus was a mass of whale-bone and iron, and nerved to blinding quickness. Neither had a weapon. It was man to man, fighting as the primitive progenitors of the race fought. There was no science about Ptolemy's onslaught. He fought like a tiger or a lion, with all the appalling frenzy of the primordial. Again and again Gordon battered his way out of a grapple that threatened to snap his spine like a rotten branch. His blinding blows ripped and smashed in a riot of destruction. The tall king of Attalus swayed and trembled before them like a tree in a storm, but always came surging back like a typhoon, lashing out with great strokes that drove Gordon staggering before him, rending and tearing with mighty fingers.

Only his desperate speed and the savage skill of boxing and wrestling that was his had saved Gordon so long. Naked to the waist, battered and bruised, his tortured body quivered with the punishment he was enduring. But Ptolemy's great chest was heaving. His face was a mask of raw beef, and his torso showed the effects of a beating that would have killed a lesser man.

Gasping a cry that was half curse, half sob, he threw himself bodily on the American, bearing him down by sheer weight. As they fell he drove a knee savagely at Gordon's groin, and tried to fall with his full weight on the smaller man's breast. A twist of his body sent the knee sliding harmlessly along his thigh, and Gordon writhed from under the heavier body as they fell.

The impact broke their holds, and they staggered up simultaneously. Through the blood and sweat that streamed into his eyes, Gordon saw the king towering above him, reeling, arms spread, blood pouring down his mighty breast. His belly went in as he drew a great laboring breath. And into the relaxed pit of his stomach Gordon, crouching, drove his left with all the strength of his rigid arm, iron shoulders and knotted calves behind it. His clenched fist sank to the wrist in Ptolemy's solar plexus. The king's breath went out of him in an explosive grunt. His hands dropped and he swayed like a tall tree under the axe. Gordon's right, hooking up in a terrible arc, met his jaw with a sound like a cooper's mallet, and Ptolemy pitched headlong and lay still.





IN THE STUPEFIED silence that followed the fall of the king, while all eyes, dilated with surprise, were fixed on the prostrate giant and the groggy figure that weaved above him, a gasping voice shouted from outside the palace. It grew louder, mingled with a clatter of hoofs which stopped at the outer steps. All wheeled toward the door as a wild figure staggered in, spattering blood.

"A guard from the pass!" cried Bardylis.

"The Moslems!" cried the man, blood spurting through his fingers which he pressed to his shoulder. "Three hundred Afghans! They have stormed the pass! They are led by a *feringhi* and four *turki* who have rifles that fire many times without reloading! These men shot us down from afar off as we strove to defend the pass. The Afghans have entered the valley—" He swayed and fell, blood trickling from his lips. A blue bullet hole showed in his shoulder, near the base of his neck.

No clamor of terror greeted this appalling news. In the utter silence that followed, all eyes turned toward Gordon, leaning dizzily against the wall, gasping for breath.

"You have conquered Ptolemy," said Bardylis. "He is dead or senseless. While he is helpless, you are king. That is the law. Tell us what to do."

Gordon gathered his dazed wits and accepted the situation without demur or question. If the Afghans

were in the valley, there was no time to waste. He thought he could hear the distant popping of firearms already.

"How many men are able to bear arms?" he panted.

"Three hundred and fifty," answered one of the chiefs.

"Then let them take their weapons and follow me," he said. "The walls of the city are rotten. If we try to defend them, with Hunyadi directing the siege, we will be trapped like rats. We must win with one stroke, if at all."

Someone brought him a sheathed and belted scimitar and he buckled it about his waist. His head was still swimming and his body numb, but from some obscure reservoir he drew a fund of reserve power, and the prospect of a final showdown with Hunyadi fired his blood. At his directions men lifted Ptolemy and placed him on a couch. The king had not moved since he dropped, and Gordon thought it probable that he had a concussion of the brain. That poleax smash that had felled him would have split the skull of a lesser man.

Then Gordon remembered Abdullah, and looked about for him, but the Tajik had vanished.

At the head of the warriors of Attalus, Gordon strode down the street and through the ponderous gate. All were armed with long curved swords; some had unwieldy matchlocks, ancient weapons captured from the hill tribes. He knew the Afghans would be no better armed, but the rifles of Hunyadi and his Turks would count heavily.

He could see the horde swarming up the valley, still some distance away. They were on foot. Lucky for the Attalans that one of the pass-guards had kept a horse near him. Otherwise the Afghans would have been at the very walls of the town before the word came of their invasion.

The invaders were drunk with exultation, halting to fire outlying huts and growing stuff, and to shoot cattle, in sheer wanton destructiveness. Behind Gordon rose a deep rumble of rage, and looking back at the blazing blue eyes, and tall, tense figures, the American knew he was leading no weaklings to battle.

He led them to a long straggling heap of stones which ran waveringly clear across the valley, marking an ancient fortification, long abandoned and crumbling down. It would afford some cover. When they reached it the invaders were still out of rifle fire. The Afghans had ceased their plundering and came on at an increased gait, howling like wolves.

Gordon ordered his men to lie down behind the stones, and called to him the warriors with the matchlocks—some thirty in all.

"Pay no heed to the Afghans," he instructed them. "Shoot at the men with the rifles. Do not shoot at random, but wait until I give the word, then all fire together."

The ragged horde were spreading out somewhat as they approached, loosing their matchlocks before they were in range of the grim band waiting silently along the crumbled wall. The Attalans quivered with eagerness, but Gordon gave no sign. He saw the tall, supple figure of Hunyadi, and the bulkier shapes of his turbaned Turks, in the center of the ragged crescent. The men came straight on, apparently secure in the knowledge that the Attalans had no modern weapons, and that Gordon had lost his rifle. They had seen him climbing down the cliff without it. Gordon cursed Abdullah, whose treachery had lost him his pistol.

Before they were in range of the matchlocks, Hunyadi fired, and the warrior at Gordon's side slumped over, drilled through the head. A mutter of rage and impatience ran along the line, but Gordon quieted the warriors, ordering them to lie closer behind the rocks. Hunyadi tried again, and the Turks blazed away, but

the bullets whined off the stones. The men moved nearer and behind them the Afghans howled with blood-thirsty impatience, rapidly getting out of hand.

Gordon had hoped to lure Hunyadi into reach of his matchlocks. But suddenly, with an earth-shaking yell, the Afghans stormed past the Hungarian in a wave, knives flaming like the sun on water. Hunyadi yelped explosively, unable to see or shoot at his enemies, for the backs of his reckless allies. Despite his curses, they came on with a roar.

Gordon, crouching among the stones, glared at the gaunt giants rushing toward him until he could make out the fanatical blaze of their eyes, then he roared: "*Fire.*"

A thunderous volley ripped out along the wall, ragged, but terrible at that range. A storm of lead blasted the oncoming line, and men went down in windrows. Lost to all caution, the Attalans leaped the wall and hewed into the staggering Afghans with naked steel. Cursing as Hunyadi had cursed, Gordon drew his scimitar and followed them.

No time for orders now, no formation, no strategy. Attalan and Afghan, they fought as men fought a thousand years ago, without order or plan, massed in a straining, grunting, hacking mob, where naked blades flickered like lightning. Yard-long Khyber knives clanged and ground against the curved swords of the Attalans. The rending of flesh and bone beneath the chopping blades was like the sound of butchers' cleavers. The dying dragged down the living and the warriors stumbled among the mangled corpses. It was a shambles where no quarter was asked and none given, and the feuds and hates of a thousand years glutted in slaughter.

No shots were fired in that deadly crush, but about the edges of the battle circled Hunyadi and the Turks, shooting with deadly accuracy. Man to man, the stalwart Attalans were a match for the hairy hillmen, and



they slightly outnumbered the invaders. But they had thrown away the advantage of their position, and the rifles of the Hungarian's own party were dealing havoc in their disordered ranks. Two of the Turks were down, one hit by a matchlock ball in that first and only volley, and another disembowelled by a dying Attalan.

As Gordon hewed his way through the straining knots and flailing blades, he met one of the remaining Turks face to face. The man thrust a rifle muzzle in his face, but the hammer fell with a click on an empty shell, and the next instant Gordon's scimitar ripped through his belly and stood out a foot behind his back. As the American twisted his blade free, the other Turk fired a pistol, missed, and hurled the empty weapon fruitlessly. He rushed in, slashing with a saber at Gordon's head. El Borak parried the singing blade, and his scimitar cut the air like a blue beam, splitting the Turk's skull to the chin.

Then he saw Hunyadi. The Hungarian was groping in his belt, and Gordon knew he was out of ammunition.

"We've tried hot lead, Gustav," challenged Gordon, "and we both still live. Come and try cold steel!"

With a wild laugh the Hungarian ripped out his blade in a bright shimmer of steel that caught the morning sun. He was a tall man, Gustav Hunyadi, black sheep son of a noble Magyar house, supple and lithe as a catamount, with dancing, reckless eyes and lips that curved in a smile as cruel as a striking sword.

"I match my life against a little package of papers, El Borak!" the Hungarian laughed as the blades met.

On each side the fighting lulled and ceased, as the warriors drew back with heaving chests and dripping swords, to watch their leaders settle the score.

The curved blades sparkled in the sunlight, ground together, leaped apart, licked in and out like living things.

Well for El Borak then that his wrist was a solid

mass of steel cords, that his eye was quicker and surer than a falcon's, and his brain and thews bound together with a coordination keen as razor-edged steel. For into his play Hunyadi brought all the skill of a race of swordsmen, all the craft taught by masters of the blade of Europe and of Asia, and all the savage cunning he had learned in wild battles on the edges of the world.

He was taller and had the longer reach. Again and again his blade whispered at Gordon's throat. Once it touched his arm, and a trickle of crimson began. There was no sound except the rasp of feet on the sward, the rapid whisper of the blades, the deep panting of the men. Gordon was the harder pressed. That terrible fight with Ptolemy was taking its toll. His legs trembled, his sight kept blurring. As if through a mist he saw the triumphant smile growing on the thin lips of the Magyar.

And a wild surge of desperation rose in Gordon's soul, nerving him for a last rush. It came with the unexpected fury of a dying wolf, with a flaming fan of steel, a whirlwind of blades—and then Hunyadi was down, clutching at the earth with twitching hands, Gordon's narrow curved blade through him.

The Hungarian rolled his glazing eyes up at his conqueror, and his lips distorted in a ghastly smile. "To the mistress of all true adventurers!" he whispered, choking on his own blood. "To the Lady Death!"

He sank back and lay still, his pallid face turned to the sky, blood oozing from his lips.

The Afghans began slinking furtively away, their morale broken, like a pack of wolves whose leader is down. Suddenly, as if waking from a dream, the Attalans gave tongue and pelted after them. The invaders broke and fled, while the infuriated Attalans followed, stabbing and hacking at their backs, down the valley and out through the pass.

Gordon was aware that Bardylis, blood-stained but exultant, was beside him, supporting his trembling frame that seemed on the point of collapse. The Amer-

ican wiped the bloody sweat from his eyes, and touched the packet under his girdle. Many men had died for that. But many more would have died had it not been saved, including helpless women and children.

Bardylis muttered apprehensively, and Gordon looked up to see a gigantic figure approaching leisurely from the direction of the city, through whose gate the rejoicing women were already streaming. It was Ptolemy, his features grotesquely swollen and blackened from Gordon's iron fists. He strode serenely through the heaps of corpses, and reached the spot where the companions stood.

Bardylis gripped his notched sword, and Ptolemy, seeing the gesture, grinned with his pulped lips. He was holding something behind him.

"I do not come in anger, El Borak," he said calmly. "A man who can fight as you have fought is neither wizard, thief nor murderer. I am no child to hate a man who has bested me in fair fight—and then saved my kingdom while I lay senseless. Will you take my hand?"

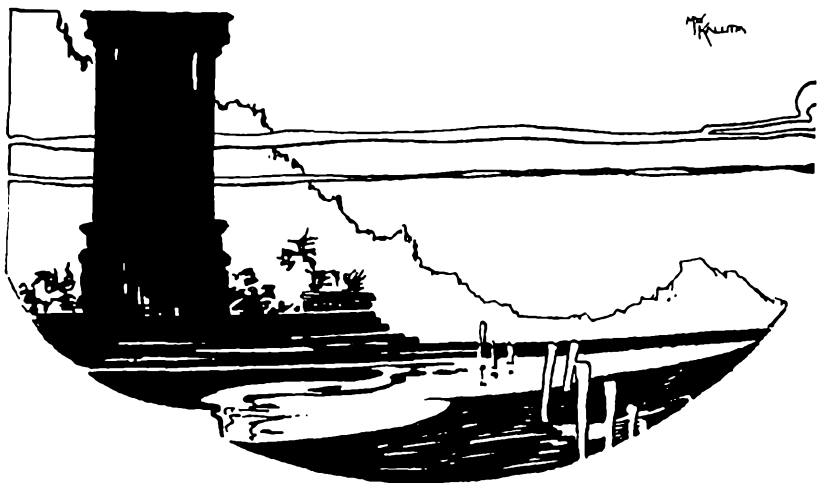
Gordon grasped it with an honest surge of friendship toward this giant, whose only fault, after all, was his vanity.

"I did not recover my senses in time for the battle," said Ptolemy. "I only saw the last of it. But if I did not reach the field in time to smite the Moslem dogs, I have at least rid the valley of one rat I found hiding in the palace." He casually tossed something at Gordon's feet. The severed head of Abdullah, the features frozen in a grin of horror, stared up at the American.

"Will you live in Attalus and be my brother, as well as the brother of Bardylis?" asked Ptolemy, with a glance down the valley, toward the pass through which the warriors were harrying the howling Afghans.

"I thank you, king," said Gordon, "but I must go to my own people, and it is still a long road to travel. When I have rested for a few days, I must be gone.

A little food, to carry with me on my journey is all I ask from the people of Attalus, who are men as brave and valiant as their royal ancestors.”





TO A MAN standing in the gorge below, the man clinging to the sloping cliff would have been invisible, hidden from sight by the jutting ledges that looked like irregular stone steps from a distance. From a distance, also, the rugged wall looked easy to climb; but there were heart-breaking spaces between those ledges—stretches of treacherous shale, and steep pitches where clawing fingers and groping toes scarcely found a grip.

One misstep, one handhold lost and the climber would have pitched backward in a headlong, rolling fall three hundred feet to the rocky canyon bed. But the man on the cliff was Francis Xavier Gordon, and it was not his destiny to dash out his brains on the floor of a Himalayan gorge.

He was reaching the end of his climb. The rim of the wall was only a few feet above him, but the intervening space was the most dangerous he had yet covered. He paused to shake the sweat from his eyes, drew a deep breath through his nostrils, and once more

matched eye and muscle against the brute treachery of the gigantic barrier. Faint yells welled up from below, vibrant with hate and edged with blood lust. He did not look down. His upper lip lifted in a silent snarl, as a panther might snarl at the sound of his hunters' voices. That was all.

His fingers clawed at the stone until blood oozed from under his broken nails. Rivulets of gravel started beneath his boots and streamed down the ledges. He was almost there—but under his toe a jutting stone began to give way. With an explosive expansion of energy that brought a tortured gasp from him, he lunged upward, just as his foothold tore from the soil that had held it. For one sickening instant he felt eternity yawn beneath him—then his upflung fingers hooked over the rim of the crest. For an instant he hung there, suspended, while pebbles and stones went rattling down the face of the cliff in a miniature avalanche. Then with a powerful knotting and contracting of iron biceps, he lifted his weight and an instant later climbed over the rim and stared down.

He could make out nothing in the gorge below, beyond the glimpse of a tangle of thickets. The jutting ledges obstructed the view from above as well as from below. But he knew his pursuers were ranging those thickets down there, the men whose knives were still reeking with the blood of his friends. He heard their voices, edged with the hysteria of murder, dwindling westward. They were following a blind lead and a false trail.

Gordon stood up on the rim of the gigantic wall, the one atom of visible life among monstrous pillars and abutments of stone; they rose on all sides, dwarfing him, brown insensible giants shouldering the sky. But Gordon gave no thought to the somber magnificence of his surroundings, or of his own comparative insignificance.

Scenery, however awesome, is but a background for the human drama in its varying phases. Gordon's soul was a maelstrom of wrath, and the distant, dwindling shout below him drove crimson waves of murder surging through his brain. He drew from his boot the long knife he had placed there when he began his desperate climb. Half-dried blood stained the sharp steel, and the sight of it gave him a fierce satisfaction. There were dead men back there in the valley into which the gorge ran, and not all of them were Gordon's Afridi friends. Some were Orakzai, the henchmen of the traitor Afdal Khan—the treacherous dogs who had sat down in seeming amity with Yusef Shah, the Afridi chief, his three headmen and his American ally, and who had turned the friendly conference suddenly into a holocaust of murder.

Gordon's shirt was in ribbons, revealing a shallow sword cut across the thick muscles of his breast, from which blood oozed slowly. His black hair was plastered with sweat, the scabbards at his hips empty. He might have been a statue on the cliffs, he stood so motionless, except for the steady rise and fall of his arching chest as he breathed deep through expanded nostrils. In his black eyes grew a flame like fire on deep black water. His body grew rigid; muscles swelled in knotted cords on his arms, and the veins of his temples stood out.

Treachery and murder! He was still bewildered, seeking a motive. His actions until this moment had been largely instinctive, reflexes responding to peril and the threat of destruction. The episode had been so unexpected—so totally lacking in apparent reason. One moment a hum of friendly conversation, men sitting cross-legged about a fire while tea boiled and meat roasted; the next instant knives sinking home, guns crashing, men falling in the smoke—Afridi men, his friends, struck down about him, with their rifles laid aside, their knives in their scabbards.

Only his steel-trap coordination had saved him—

that instant, primitive reaction to danger that is not dependent upon reason or any logical thought process. Even before his conscious mind grasped what was happening, Gordon was on his feet with both guns blazing. And then there was no time for consecutive thinking, nothing but desperate hand-to-hand-fighting, and flight on foot—a long run and a hard climb. But for the thicket-choked mouth of a narrow gorge they would have had him, in spite of everything.

NOW, temporarily safe, he could pause and apply reasoning to the problem of why Afdal Khan, chief of the Khoruk Orakzai, plotted thus foully to slay the four chiefs of his neighbors, the Afridis of Kurram, and their *feringhi* friend. But no motive presented itself. The massacre seemed utterly wanton and reasonless. At the moment Gordon did not greatly care. It was enough to know that his friends were dead, and to know who had killed them.

Another tier of rock rose some yards behind him, broken by a narrow, twisting cleft. Into this he moved. He did not expect to meet an enemy; they would all be down there in the gorge, beating up the thickets for him; but he carried the long knife in his hand, just in case.

It was purely an instinctive gesture, like the unsheathing of a panther's claws. His dark face was like iron; his black eyes burned redly; as he strode along the narrow defile he was more dangerous than any wounded panther. An urge painful in its intensity beat at his brain like a hammer that would not cease; revenge! revenge! revenge! All the depths of his being responded to the reverberation. The thin veneer of civilization had been swept away by a red tidal wave. Gordon had gone back a million years into the red dawn of man's beginning; he was as starkly primitive as the colossal stones that rose about him.

Ahead of him the defile twisted about a jutting shoulder to come, as he knew, out upon a winding

mountain path. That path would lead him out of the country of his enemies, and he had no reason to expect to meet any of them upon it. So it was a shocking surprise to him when he rounded the granite shoulder and came face to face with a tall man who lolled against a rock, with a pistol in his hand.

That pistol was leveled at the American's breast. Gordon stood motionless, a dozen feet separating the two men. Beyond the tall man stood a finely caparisoned Kabuli stallion, tied to a tamarisk.

"Ali Bahadur!" muttered Gordon, the red flame in his black eyes.

"Aye!" Ali Bahadur was clad in Pathan elegance. His boots were stitched with gilt thread, his turban was of rose-colored silk, and his girdled *khalat* was gaudily striped. He was a handsome man, with an aquiline face and dark, alert eyes, which just now were lighted with cruel triumph. He laughed mockingly.

"I was not mistaken, El Borak. When you fled into the thicket-choked mouth of the gorge, I did not follow you as the others did. They ran headlong into the copse, on foot, bawling like bulls. Not I. I did not think you would flee on down the gorge until my men cornered you. I believed that as soon as you got out of their sight you would climb the wall, though no man has ever climbed it before. I knew you would climb out on this side, for not even Shaitan the Damned could scale those sheer precipices on the other side of the gorge.

"So I galloped back up the valley to where, a mile north of the spot where we camped, another gorge opens and runs westward. This path leads up out of that gorge and crosses the ridge and here turns south-westerly—as I knew you knew. My steed is swift! I knew this point was the only one at which you could reach this trail, and when I arrived, there were no boot prints in the dust to tell me you had reached it and passed on ahead of me. Nay, hardly had I paused

when I heard stones rattling down the cliff, so I dismounted and awaited your coming! For only through that cleft could you reach the path."

"You came alone," said Gordon, never taking his eyes from the Orakzai. "You have more guts than I thought."

"I knew you had no guns," answered Ali Bahadur. "I saw you empty them and throw them away and draw your knife as you fought your way through my warriors. Courage? Any fool can have courage. I have wits, which is better."

"You talk like a Persian," muttered Gordon. He was caught fairly, his scabbards empty, his knife arm hanging at his side. He knew Ali would shoot at the slightest motion.

"My brother Afdal Khan will praise me when I bring him your head!" taunted the Orakzai. His Oriental vanity could not resist making a grandiose gesture out of his triumph. Like many of his race, swaggering dramatics were his weakness; if he had simply hidden behind a rock and shot Gordon when he first appeared, Ali Bahadur might be alive today.

"Why did Afdal Khan invite us to a feast and then murder my friends?" Gordon demanded. "There has been peace between the clans for years."

"My brother has ambitions," answered Ali Bahadur. "The Afridis stood in his way, though they knew it not. Why should my brother waste men in a long war to remove them? Only a fool gives warning before he strikes."

"And only a dog turns traitor," retorted Gordon.

"The salt had not been eaten," reminded Ali. "The men of Kurram were fools, and thou with them!" He was enjoying his triumph to the utmost, prolonging the scene as greatly as he dared. He knew he should have shot already.

THERE WAS a tense readiness about Gordon's posture that made his flesh crawl, and Gordon's eyes were red flame when the sun struck them. But it gluttled Ali's vanity deliriously to know that El Borak, the grimmest fighter in all the North, was in his power—held at pistol muzzle, poised on the brink of Jehannum into which he would topple at the pressure of a finger on the trigger. Ali Bahadur knew Gordon's deadly quickness, how he could spring and kill in the flicker of an eyelid. But no human thews could cross the intervening yards quicker than lead spitting from a pistol muzzle. And at the first hint of movement, Ali would bring the gratifying scene to a sudden close.

Gordon opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it. The suspicious Pathan was instantly tense. Gordon's eyes flickered past him, then back instantly, and fixed on his face with an increased intensity. To all appearances Gordon had seen something behind Ali—something he did not wish Ali to see, and was doing all in his power to conceal the fact that he had seen something, to keep Ali from turning his head. And turn his head Ali did; he did it involuntarily, in spite of himself. He had not completed the motion before he sensed the trick and jerked his head back, firing as he did so, even as he caught the blur that was the lightninglike motion of Gordon's right arm.

Motion and shot were practically simultaneous. Ali went to his knees as if struck by sudden paralysis, and flopped over on his side. Gurgling and choking he struggled to his elbows, eyes starting from his head, lips drawn back in a ghastly grin, his chin held up by the hilt of Gordon's knife that jutted from his throat. With a dying effort he lifted the pistol with both hands, trying to cock it with fumbling thumbs. Then blood gushed from his blue lips and the pistol slipped from his hands. His fingers clawed briefly at the earth, then

spread and stiffened, and his head sank down on his extended arms.

Gordon had not moved from his tracks. Blood oozed slowly from a round blue hole in his left shoulder. He did not seem to be aware of the wound. Not until Ali Bahadur's brief, spasmodic twitchings had ceased did he move. He snarled, the thick, blood-gluttled snarl of a jungle cat, and spat toward the prostrate Orakzai.

He made no move to recover the knife he had thrown with such deadly force and aim, nor did he pick up the smoking pistol. He strode to the stallion which snorted and trembled at the reek of spilt blood, untied him and swung into the gilt-stitched saddle.

As he reined away up the winding hill path he turned in the saddle and shook his fist in the direction of his enemies—a threat and a ferocious promise; the game had just begun; the first blood had been shed in a feud that was to litter the hills with charred villages and the bodies of dead men, and trouble the dreams of kings and viceroys.



GEOFFREY WILLOUGHBY shifted himself in his saddle and glanced at the gaunt ridges and bare stone crags that rose about him, mentally comparing the members of his escort with the features of the landscape.

Physical environment inescapably molded its in-

habitants. With one exception his companions were as sullen, hard, barbarous and somber as the huge brown rocks that frowned about them. The one exception was Suleiman, a Punjabi Moslem, ostensibly his servant, actually a valuable member of the English secret service.

Willoughby himself was not a member of that service. His status was unique; he was one of those ubiquitous Englishmen who steadily build the empire, moving obscurely behind the scenes, and letting other men take the credit—men in bemedaled uniforms, or loud-voiced men with top hats and titles.

Few knew just what Willoughby's commission was, or what niche he filled in the official structure; but the epitome of the man and his career was once embodied in the request of a harried deputy commissioner: "Hell on the border; send Willoughby!" Because of his unadvertised activities, troops did not march and cannons did not boom on more occasions than the general public ever realized. So it was not really surprising—except to those die-hards who refuse to believe that maintaining peace on the Afghan Border is fundamentally different from keeping order in Trafalgar Square—that Willoughby should be riding forth in the company of hairy cutthroats to arbitrate a bloody hill feud at the request of an Oriental despot.

Willoughby was of medium height and stockily, almost chubbily, built, though there were unexpected muscles under his ruddy skin. His hair was taffy-colored, his eyes blue, wide and deceptively ingenuous. He wore civilian khakis and a huge sun helmet. If he was armed the fact was not apparent. His frank, faintly freckled face was not unpleasant, but it displayed little evidence of the razor-sharp brain that worked behind it.

He jogged along as placidly as if he were ambling down a lane in his native Suffolk, and he was more at

ease than the ruffians who accompanied him—four wild-looking, ragged tribesmen under the command of a patriarch whose stately carriage and gray-shot pointed beard did not conceal the innate savagery reflected in his truculent visage. Baber Ali, uncle of Afdal Khan, was old, but his back was straight as a trooper's, and his gaunt frame was wolfishly hard. He was his nephew's right-hand man, possessing all Afdal Khan's ferocity, but little of his subtlety and cunning.

They were following a trail that looped down a steep slope which fell away for a thousand feet into a labyrinth of gorges. In a valley a mile to the south, Willoughby sighted a huddle of charred and blackened ruins.

"A village, Baber?" he asked.

Baber snarled like an old wolf.

"Aye! That was Khuttak! El Borak and his devils burned it and slew every man able to bear arms."

Willoughby looked with new interest. It was such things as that he had come to stop, and it was El Borak he was now riding to see.

"El Borak is a son of Shaitan," growled old Baber. "Not a village of Afdal Khan's remains unburned save only Khoruk itself. And of the outlying towers, only my *sangar* remains, which lies between this spot and Khoruk. Now he has seized the cavern called Akbar's Castle, and that is in Orakzai territory. By Allah, for an hour we have been riding in country claimed by us Orakzai, but now it has become a no man's land, a border strewn with corpses and burned villages, where no man's life is safe. At any moment we may be fired upon."

"Gordon has given his word," reminded Willoughby.

"His word is not wind," admitted the old ruffian grudgingly.

They had dropped down from the heights and were traversing a narrow plateau that broke into a series of gorges at the other end. Willoughby thought of the letter in his pocket, which had come to him by devious ways. He had memorized it, recognizing its dramatic value as a historical document.

Geoffrey Willoughby,
Ghazrael Fort:

If you want to parley, come to Shaitan's Minaret, alone. Let your escort stop outside the mouth of the gorge. They won't be molested, but if any Orakzai follows you into the gorge, he'll be shot.

Francis X. Gordon.

Concise and to the point. Parley, eh? The man had assumed the role of a general carrying on a regular war, and left no doubt that he considered Willoughby, not a disinterested arbiter, but a diplomat working in the interests of the opposing side.

"We should be near the Gorge of the Minaret," said Willoughby.

Baber Ali pointed. "There is its mouth."

"Await me here."

Suleiman dismounted and eased his steed's girths. The Pathans climbed down uneasily, hugging their rifles and scanning the escarpments. Somewhere down that winding gorge Gordon was lurking with his vengeful warriors. The Orakzai were afraid. They were miles from Khoruk, in the midst of a region that had become a bloody debatable ground through slaughter on both sides. They instinctively looked toward the southwest where, miles away, lay the crag-built village of Kurram.

Baber twisted his beard and gnawed the corner of his lip. He seemed devoured by an inward fire of anger and suspicion which would not let him rest.

"You will go forward from this point alone, *sahib*?"

Willoughby nodded, gathering up his reins.

"He will kill you!"

"I think not."

Willoughby knew very well that Baber Ali would never have thus placed himself within Gordon's reach unless he placed full confidence in the American's promise of safety.

"Then make the dog agree to a truce!" snarled Baber, his savage arrogance submerging his grudging civility. "By Allah, this feud is a thorn in the side of Af-dal Khan—and of me!"

"We'll see." Willoughby nudged his mount with his heels and jogged on down the gorge, not an impressive figure at all as he slumped carelessly in his saddle, his cork helmet bobbing with each step of the horse. Behind him the Pathans watched eagerly until he passed out of sight around a bend of the canyon.

Willoughby's tranquillity was partly, though not altogether, assumed. He was not afraid, nor was he excited. But he would have been more than human had not the anticipation of meeting El Borak stirred his imagination to a certain extent and roused speculations.

THE NAME of El Borak was woven in the tales told in all the *caravanserais* and *bazaars* from Teheran to Bombay. For three years rumors had drifted down the Khyber of intrigues and grim battles fought among the lonely hills, where a hard-eyed white man was hewing out a place of power among the wild tribesmen.

The British had not cared to interfere until this latest stone cast by Gordon into the pool of Afghan politics threatened to spread ripples that might lap at the doors of foreign palaces. Hence Willoughby, jogging down the winding Gorge of the Minaret. Queer sort of renegade, Willoughby reflected. Most white men who went native were despised by the people among whom they cast their lot. But even Gordon's enemies respected him, and it did not seem to be on account of his celebrated fighting ability alone. Gordon, Willoughby

vaguely understood, had grown up on the southwestern frontier of the United States, and had a formidable reputation as a gun fanner before he ever drifted East.

Willoughby had covered a mile from the mouth of the gorge before he rounded a bend in the rocky wall and saw the Minaret looming up before him—a tall, tapering spirelike crag, detached, except at the base, from the canyon wall. No one was in sight. Willoughby tied his horse in the shade of the cliff and walked toward the base of the Minaret where he halted and stood gently fanning himself with his helmet, and idly wondering how many rifles were aimed at him from vantage points invisible to himself. Abruptly Gordon was before him.

It was a startling experience, even to a man whose nerves were under as perfect control as Willoughby's. The Englishman indeed stopped fanning himself and stood motionless, holding the helmet lifted. There had been no sound, not even the crunch of rubble under a boot heel to warn him. One instant the space before him was empty, the next it was filled by a figure vibrant with dynamic life. Boulders strewn at the foot of the wall offered plenty of cover for a stealthy advance, but the miracle of that advance—to Willoughby, who had never fought Yaqui Indians in their own country—was the silence with which Gordon had accomplished it.

"You're Willoughby, of course." The Southern accent was faint, but unmistakable.

Willoughby nodded, absorbed in his scrutiny of the man before him. Gordon was not a large man, but he was remarkably compact, with a squareness of shoulders and a thickness of chest that reflected unusual strength and vitality. Willoughby noted the black butts of the heavy pistols jutting from his hips, the knife hilt projecting from his right boot. He sought the hard bronzed face in vain for marks of weakness or degeneracy. There was a gleam in the black eyes such

as Willoughby had never before seen in any man of the so-called civilized races.

No, this man was no degenerate; his plunging into native feuds and brawls indicated no retrogression. It was simply the response of a primitive nature seeking its most natural environment. Willoughby felt that the man before him must look exactly as an untamed, pre-civilization Anglo-Saxon must have looked some ten thousand years before.

"I'm Willoughby," he said. "Glad you found it convenient to meet me. Shall we sit down in the shade?"

"No. There's no need of taking up that much time. Word came to me that you were at Ghazrael, trying to get in touch with me. I sent you my answer by a Tajik trader. You got it, or you wouldn't be here. All right; here I am. Tell me what you've got to say and I'll answer you."

Willoughby discarded the plan he had partly formulated. The sort of diplomacy he'd had in mind wouldn't work here. This man was no dull bully, with a dominance acquired by brute strength alone, nor was he a self-seeking adventurer of the politician type, lying and bluffing his way through. He could not be bought off, nor frightened by a bluff. He was as real and vital and dangerous as a panther, though Willoughby felt no personal fear.

"All right, Gordon," he answered candidly. "My say is soon said. I'm here at the request of the Amir, and the *Raj*. I came to Fort Ghazrael to try to get in touch with you, as you know. My companion Sulciman helped. An escort of Orakzai met me at Ghazrael, to conduct me to Khoruk, but when I got your letter I saw no reason to go to Khoruk. They're waiting at the mouth of the gorge to conduct me back to Ghazrael when my job's done. I've talked with Afdal Khan only once, at Ghazrael. He's ready for peace. In fact it was at his request that the Amir sent me out here to try to settle this feud between you and him."

"It's none of the Amir's business," retorted Gordon. "Since when did he begin interfering with tribal feuds?"

"In this case one of the parties appealed to him," answered Willoughby. "Then the feud affects him personally. It's needless for me to remind you that one of the main caravan roads from Persia traverses this region, and since the feud began, the caravans avoid it and turn up into Turkestan. The trade that ordinarily passes through Kabul, by which the Amir acquires much rich revenue, is being deflected out of his territory."

"And he's dickering with the Russians to get it back." Gordon laughed mirthlessly. "He's tried to keep that secret, because English guns are all that keep him on his throne. But the Russians are offering him a lot of tempting bait, and he's playing with fire—and the British are afraid he'll scorch his fingers—and theirs!"

WILLOUGHBY blinked. Still, he might have known that Gordon would know the inside of Afghan politics at least as well as himself.

"But Afdal Khan has expressed himself, both to the Amir and to me, as desiring to end this feud," argued Willoughby. "He swears he's been acting on the defensive all along. If you don't agree to at least a truce the Amir will take a hand himself. As soon as I return to Kabul and tell him you refuse to submit to arbitration, he'll declare you an outlaw, and every ruffian in the hills will be whetting his knife for your head. Be reasonable, man. Doubtless you feel you had provocation for your attacks on Afdal Khan. But you've done enough damage. Forget what's passed—"

"Forget!"

Willoughby involuntarily stepped back as the pupils of Gordon's eyes contracted like those of an angry leopard.

"Forget!" he repeated thickly. "You ask me to forget the blood of my friends! You've heard only one side of this thing. Not that I give a damn what you think, but you'll hear my side, for once. Afdal Khan has friends at court. I haven't. I don't want any."

So a wild Highland chief might have cast his defiance in the teeth of the king's emissary, thought Willoughby, fascinated by the play of passion in the dark face before him.

"Afdal Khan invited my friends to a feast and cut them down in cold blood—Yusef Shah, and his three chiefs—all sworn friends of mine, do you understand? And you ask me to forget them, as you might ask me to throw aside a worn-out scabbard! And why? So the Amir can grab his taxes off the fat Persian traders; so the Russians won't have a chance to inveigle him into some treaty the British wouldn't approve of; so the English can keep their claws sunk in on this side of the border, too!

"Well, here's my answer: You and the Amir and the *Raj* can all go to hell together. Go back to Amir and tell him to put a price on my head. Let him send his Uzbek guards to help the Orakzai—and as many Russians and Britishers and whatever else he's able to get. This feud will end when I kill Afdal Khan. Not before."

"You're sacrificing the welfare of the many to avenge the blood of the few," protested Willoughby.

"Who says I am? Afdal Khan? He's the Amir's worst enemy, if the Amir only knew it, getting him embroiled in a war that's none of his business. In another month I'll have Afdal Khan's head, and the caravans will pass freely over this road again. If Afdal Khan should win—Why did this feud begin in the first place? I'll tell you! Afdal wants full control of the wells in this region, wells which command the caravan route, and which have been in the hands of the Afridis for centuries. Let him get possession of them and he'll fleece

the merchants before they ever get to Kabul. Yes, and turn the trade permanently into Russian territory."

"He wouldn't dare—"

"He dares anything. He's got backing you don't even guess. Ask him how it is that his men are all armed with Russian rifles! Hell! Afdal's howling for help because I've taken Akbar's Castle and he can't dislodge me. He asked you to make me agree to give up the Castle, didn't he? Yes, I thought so. And if I were fool enough to do it, he'd ambush me and my men as we marched back to Kurram. You'd hardly have time to get back to Kabul before a rider would be at your heels to tell the Amir how I'd treacherously attacked Afdal Khan and been killed in self-defense, and how Afdal had been forced to attack and burn Kurram! He's trying to gain by outside intervention what he's lost in battle, and to catch me off my guard and murder me as he did Yusef Shah. He's making monkeys out of the Amir and you. And you want me to let him make a monkey out of me—and a corpse too—just because a little dirty trade is being deflected from Kabul!"

"You needn't feel so hostile to the British—" Willoughby began.

"I don't; nor to the Persians, nor the Russians, either. I just want all hands to attend to their own business and leave mine alone."

"But this blood-feud madness isn't the proper thing for a white man," pleaded Willoughby. "You're not an Afghan. You're an Englishman, by descent, at least—"

"I'm Highland Scotch and black Irish by descent," grunted Gordon. "That's got nothing to do with it. I've had my say. Go back and tell the Amir the feud will end—when I've killed Afdal Khan."

And turning on his heel he vanished as noiselessly as he had appeared.

Willoughby started after him helplessly. Damn it

all, he'd handled this matter like an amateur! Reviewing his arguments he felt like kicking himself; but any arguments seemed puerile against the primitive determination of El Borak. Debating with him was like arguing with a wind, or a flood, or a forest fire, or some other elemental fact. The man didn't fit into any ordered classification; he was as untamed as any barbarian who trod the Himalayas, yet there was nothing rudimentary or underdeveloped about his mentality.

WELL, there was nothing to do at present but return to Fort Ghazrael and send a rider to Kabul, reporting failure. But the game was not played out. Willoughby's own stubborn determination was roused. The affair began to take on a personal aspect utterly lacking in most of his campaigns; he began to look upon it not only as a diplomatic problem, but also as a contest of wits between Gordon and himself. As he mounted his horse and headed back up the gorge, he swore he would terminate that feud, and that it would be terminated his way, and not Gordon's.

There was probably much truth in Gordon's assertions. Of course, he and the Amir had heard only Afdal Khan's side of the matter; and of course, Afdal Khan was a rogue. But he could not believe that the chief's ambitions were as sweeping and sinister as Gordon maintained. He could not believe they embraced more than a seizing of local power in this isolated hill district. Petty exactions on the caravans, now levied by the Afridis; that was all.

Anyway, Gordon had no business allowing his private wishes to interfere with official aims, which, faulty as they might be, nevertheless had the welfare of the people in view. Willoughby would never have let his personal feelings stand in the way of policy, and he considered that to do so was reprehensible in others. It was Gordon's duty to forget the murder of his friends—again Willoughby experienced that sensation of help-

lessness. Gordon would never do that. To expect him to violate his instincts was as sensible as expecting a hungry wolf to turn away from raw meat.

Willoughby had returned up the gorge as leisurely as he had ridden down it. Now he emerged from the mouth and saw Suleiman and the Pathans standing in a tense group, staring eagerly at him. Baber Ali's eyes burned like a wolf's. Willoughby felt a slight shock of surprise as he met the fierce intensity of the old chief's eyes. Why should Baber so savagely desire the success of his emissary? The Orakzai had been getting the worst of the war, but they were not whipped, by any means. Was there, after all, something behind the visible surface—some deep-laid obscure element or plot that involved Willoughby's mission? Was there truth in Gordon's accusations of foreign entanglements and veiled motives?

Baber took three steps forward, and his beard quivered with his eagerness.

"Well?" His voice was harsh as the rasp of a sword against its scabbard. "Will the dog make peace?"

Willoughby shook his head. "He swears the feud will end only when he has slain Afdal Khan."

"Thou hast failed!"

The passion in Baber's voice startled Willoughby. For an instant he thought the chief would draw his long knife and leap upon him. Then Baber Ali deliberately turned his back on the Englishman and strode to his horse. Freeing it with a savage jerk he swung into the saddle and galloped away without a backward glance. And he did not take the trail Willoughby must follow on his return to Fort Ghazrael; he rode north, in the direction of Khoruk. The implication was unmistakable; he was abandoning Willoughby to his own resources, repudiating all responsibility for him.

Suleiman bent his head as he fumbled at his mount's girths, to hide the tinge of gray that crept under his brown skin. Willoughby turned from staring

after the departing chief, to see the eyes of the four tribesmen fixed unwinkingly upon him—hard, murky eyes from under shocks of tangled hair.

He felt a slight chill crawl down his spine. These men were savages, hardly above the mental level of wild beasts. They would act unthinkingly, blindly following the instincts implanted in them and their kind throughout long centuries of merciless Himalayan existence. Their instincts were to murder and plunder all men not of their own clan. He was an alien. The protection spread over him and his companion by their chief had been removed.

By turning his back and riding away as he had, Baber Ali had tacitly given permission for the *feringhi* to be slain. Baber Ali was himself far more of a savage than was Afdal Khan; he was governed by his untamed emotions, and prone to do childish and horrible things in moments of passion. Infuriated by Willoughby's failure to bring about a truce, it was characteristic of him to vent his rage and disappointment on the Englishman.

Willoughby calmly reviewed the situation in the time he took to gather up his reins. He could never get back to Ghazrael without an escort. If he and Suleiman tried to ride away from these ruffians, they would undoubtedly be shot in the back. There was nothing else to do but try and bluff it out. They had been given their orders to escort him to the Gorge of the Minaret and back again to Fort Ghazrael. Those orders had not been revoked in actual words. The tribesmen might hesitate to act on their own initiative, without positive orders.

He glanced at the low-hanging sun, nudged his horse.

"Let's be on our way. We have far to ride."

He pushed straight at the cluster of men who divided sullenly to let him through. Suleiman followed him. Neither looked to right nor left, nor showed by

any sign that they expected the men to do other than follow them. Silently the Pathans swung upon their horses and trailed after them, rifle butts resting on thighs, muzzles pointing upward.

Willoughby slouched in his saddle, jogging easily along. He did not look back, but he felt four pairs of beady eyes fixed on his broad back in sullen indecision. His matter-of-fact manner baffled them, exerted a certain dominance over their slow minds. But he knew that if either he or Suleiman showed the slightest sign of fear or doubt, they would be shot down instantly. He whistled tunelessly between his teeth, whimsically feeling as if he were riding along the edge of a volcano which might erupt at any instant.

THEY PUSHED eastward, following trails that wandered down into valleys and up over rugged slants. The sun dipped behind a thousand-foot ridge and the valleys were filled with purple shadows. They reached the spot where, as they passed it earlier in the day, Baber Ali had indicated that they would camp that night. There was a well there. The Pathans drew rein without orders from Willoughby. He would rather have pushed on, but to argue would have roused suspicions of fear on his part.

The well stood near a cliff, on a broad shelf flanked by steep slopes and ravine-cut walls. The horses were unsaddled, and Suleiman spread Willoughby's blanket rolls at the foot of the wall. The Pathans, stealthy and silent as wild things, began gathering dead tamarisk for a fire. Willoughby sat down on a rock near a cleft in the wall, and began tracing a likeness of Gordon in a small notebook, straining his eyes in the last of the twilight. He had a knack in that line, and the habit had proved valuable in the past, in the matter of uncovering disguises and identifying wanted men.

He believed that his calm acceptance of obedience

as a matter of course had reduced the Pathans to a state of uncertainty, if not actual awe. As long as they were uncertain, they would not attack him.

The men moved about the small camp, performing various duties. Suleiman bent over the tiny fire, and on the other side of it a Pathan was unpacking a bundle of food. Another tribesman approached the fire from behind the Punjabi, bringing more wood.

Some instinct caused Willoughby to look up, just as the Pathan with the arm load of wood came up behind Suleiman. The Punjabi had not heard the man's approach; he did not look around. His first intimation that there was any one behind him was when the tribesman drew a knife and sank it between his shoulders.

It was done too quickly for Willoughby to shout a warning. He caught the glint of the firelight on the blade as it was driven into Suleiman's back. The Punjabi cried out and fell to his knees, and the man on the other side of the fire snatched a flint-lock pistol from among his rags and shot him through the body. Suleiman drew his revolver and fired once, and the tribesman fell into the fire, shot through the head. Suleiman slipped down in a pool of his own blood, and lay still.

It all happened while Willoughby was springing to his feet. He was unarmed. He stood frozen for an instant, helpless. One of the men picked up a rifle and fired at him point-blank. He heard the bullet smash on a rock behind him. Stung out of his paralysis he turned and sprang into the cleft of the wall. An instant later he was running as fleetly down the narrow gap as his build would allow, his heels winged by the wild howls of triumph behind him.

Willoughby would have cursed himself as he ran, could he have spared the breath. The sudden attack had been brutish, blundering, without plan or premeditation. The tribesman had unexpectedly found

himself behind Suleiman and had reacted to his natural instincts. Willoughby realized that if he had had a revolver he could probably have defeated the attack, at least upon his own life. He had never needed one before; had always believed diplomacy a better weapon than a firearm. But twice today diplomacy had failed miserably. All the faults and weaknesses of his system seemed to be coming to light at once. He had made a pretty hash of this business from the start.

But he had an idea that he would soon be beyond self-censure or official blame. Those bloodthirsty yells, drawing nearer behind him, assured him of that.

Suddenly Willoughby was afraid, horribly afraid. His tongue seemed frozen to his palate and a clammy sweat beaded his skin. He ran on down the dark defile like a man running in a nightmare, his ears straining for the expected sound of sandaled feet pattering behind him, the skin between his shoulders crawling in expectation of a plunging knife. It was dark. He caromed into boulders, tripped over loose stones, tearing the skin of his hands on the shale.

Abruptly he was out of the defile, and a knife-edge ridge loomed ahead of him like the steep roof of a house, black against the blue-black star-dotted sky. He struggled up it, his breath coming in racking gasps. He knew they were close behind him, although he could see nothing in the dark.

But keen eyes saw his dim bulk outlined against the stars when he crawled over the crest. Tongues of red flame licked in the darkness below him; reports banged flatly against the rocky walls. Frantically he hauled himself over and rolled down the slope on the other side. But not all the way. Almost immediately he brought up against something hard yet yielding. Vaguely, half blind from sweat and exhaustion, he saw a figure looming over him, some object lifted in menace outlined against the stars. He threw up an arm

but it did not check the swinging rifle stock. Fire burst in glittering sparks about him, and he did not hear the crackling of the rifles that ran along the crest of the ridge.



IT WAS the smashing reverberation of gunfire, reechoing between narrow walls, which first impressed itself on Willoughby's sluggishly reviving consciousness. Then he was aware of his throbbing head. Lifting a hand to it, he discovered it had been efficiently bandaged. He was lying on what felt like a sheepskin coat, and he felt bare, cold rock under it. He struggled to his elbows and shook his head violently, setting his teeth against the shooting pain that resulted.

He lay in darkness, yet, some yards away, a white curtain shimmered dazzlingly before him. He swore and batted his eyes, and as his blurred sight cleared, things about him assumed their proper aspect. He was in a cave, and that white curtain was the mouth, with moonlight streaming across it. He started to rise and a rough hand grabbed him and jerked him down again, just as a rifle cracked somewhere outside and a bullet whined into the cave and smacked viciously on the stone wall.

"Keep down, *sahib!*" growled a voice in *Pashtu*. The Englishman was aware of men in the cave with him. Their eyes shone in the dark as they turned their heads toward him.

His groggy brain was functioning now, and he could understand what he saw. The cave was not a large one, and it opened upon a narrow plateau, bathed in vivid moonlight and flanked by rugged slopes. For about a hundred yards before the cave mouth the plain lay level and almost bare of rocks, but beyond that it was strewn with boulders and cut by gullies. And from those boulders and ravines white puffs bloomed from time to time, accompanied by sharp reports. Lead smacked and splattered about the entrance and whined venomously into the cavern. Somewhere a man was breathing in panting gasps that told Willoughby he was badly wounded. The moon hung at such an angle that it drove a white bar down the middle of the cave for some fifteen feet; and death lurked in that narrow strip, for the men in the cave.

They lay close to the walls on either side, hidden from the view of the besiegers and partially sheltered by broken rocks. They were not returning the fire. They lay still, hugging their rifles, the whites of their eyes gleaming in the darkness as they turned their heads from time to time.

Willoughby was about to speak, when on the plain outside a *kalpak* was poked cautiously around one end of a boulder. There was no response from the cave. The defenders knew that in all probability that sheep-skin cap was stuck on a gun muzzle instead of a human head.

"Do you see the dog, *sahib*?" whispered a voice in the gloom, and Willoughby started as the answer came. For though it was framed in almost accentless *Pashtu*, it was the voice of a white man—the unmistakable voice of Francis Xavier Gordon.

"I see him. He's peeking around the other end of that boulder—trying to get a better shot at us, while his mate distracts our attention with that hat. See?

Close to the ground, there—just about a hand's breadth of his head. Ready? All right—now!"

Six rifles cracked in a stuttering detonation, and instantly a white-clad figure rolled from behind the boulder, flopped convulsively and lay still, a sprawl of twisted limbs in the moonlight. That, considered Willoughby, was damned good shooting, if no more than one of the six bullets hit the exposed head. The men in the cave had phosphorous rubbed on their sights, and they were not wasting ammunition.

The success of the fusillade was answered by a chorus of wrathful yells from outside, and a storm of lead burst against the cave. Plenty of it found its way inside, and hot metal splashing from a glancing slug stung Willoughby's arm through the sleeve. But the marksmen were aiming too high to do any damage, unwilling as they were to expose themselves to the fire from the cavern. Gordon's men were grimly silent; they neither wasted lead on unseen enemies, nor indulged in the jeers and taunts so dear to the Afghan fighting man.

When the storm subsided to a period of vengeful waiting, Willoughby called in a low voice: "Gordon! Oh, I say there, Gordon!"

An instant later a dim form crawled to his side.

"Coming to at last, Willoughby? Here, take a swig of this."

A whiskey flask was pressed into his hand.

"No, thanks, old chap. I think you have a man who needs it worse than I." Even as he spoke he was aware that he no longer heard the stertorous breathing of the wounded man.

"That was Ahmed Khan," said Gordon. "He's gone; died while they were shooting in here a moment ago. Shot through the body as we were making for this cave."

"That's the Orakzai out there?" asked Willoughby.

“Who else?”

THE THROBBING in his head irritated the Englishman; his right forearm was painfully bruised, and he was thirsty.

“Let me get this straight, Gordon—am I a prisoner?”

“That depends on the way you look at it. Just now we’re all hemmed up in this cave. Sorry about your broken head. But the fellow who hit you didn’t know but what you were an Orakzai. It was dark.”

“What the devil happened, anyway?” demanded Willoughby. “I remember them killing Suleiman, and chasing me—then I got that clout on the head and went out. I must have been unconscious for hours.”

“You were. Six of my men trailed you all the way from the mouth of the Gorge of the Minaret. I didn’t trust Baber Ali, though it didn’t occur to me that he’d try to kill you. I was well on my way back to Akbar’s Castle when one of the men caught up with me and told me that Baber Ali had ridden off in the direction of his *sangar* and left you with his four tribesmen. I believed they intended murdering you on the road to Ghazrael, and laying it onto me. So I started after you myself.

“When you pitched camp by Jehungir’s Well my men were watching from a distance, and I wasn’t far away, riding hard to catch up with you before your escort killed you. Naturally I wasn’t following the open trail you followed. I was coming up from the south. My men saw the Orakzai kill Suleiman, but they weren’t close enough to do anything about it.

“When you ran into the defile with the Orakzai pelting after you, my men lost sight of you all in the darkness and were trying to locate you when you bumped into them. Khoda Khan knocked you stiff before he recognized you. They fired on the three men who were chasing you, and those fellows took to their heels. I heard the firing, and so did somebody else; we arrived on the scene just about the same time.”

“Eh? What’s that? Who?”

“Your friend, Baber Ali, with thirty horsemen! We slung you on a horse, and it was a running fight until moonrise. We were trying to get back to Akbar’s Castle, but they had fresher horses and they ran us down. They got us hemmed out there on that plain and the only thing we could do was to duck in here and make our stand. So here we are, and out there he is, with thirty men—not including the three ruffians who killed your servant. He shot them in their tracks. I heard the shots and their death howls as we rode for the hills.”

“I guess the old villian repented of his temper,” said Willoughby. “What a cursed pity he didn’t arrive a few minutes earlier. It would have saved Suleiman, poor devil. Thanks for pulling me out of a nasty mess, old fellow. And now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be going.”

“Where?”

“Why, out there! To Ghazrael. First to Baber Ali, naturally. I’ve got a few things to tell that old devil.”

“Willoughby, are you a fool?” Gordon demanded harshly.

“To think you’d let me go? Well, perhaps I am. I’d forgotten that as soon as I return to Kabul, you’ll be declared an outlaw, won’t you? But you can’t keep me here forever, you know—”

“I don’t intend to try,” answered Gordon with a hint of anger. “If your skull wasn’t already cracked I’d feel inclined to bash your head for accusing me of imprisoning you. Shake the cobwebs out of your brain. If you’re an example of a British diplomat, Heaven help the empire!

“Don’t you know you’d instantly be filled with lead if you stepped out there? Don’t you know that Baber Ali wants your head right now more than he does mine?”

“Why do you think he hasn’t sent a man riding a horse to death to tell Afdal Khan he’s got El Borak trapped in a cave miles from Akbar’s Castle? I’ll tell

you: Baber Ali doesn't want Afdal to know what a mess he's made of things.

"It was characteristic of the old devil to ride off and leave you to be murdered by his ruffians; but when he cooled off a little, he realized that he'd be held responsible. He must have gotten clear to his *sangar* before he realized that. Then he took a band of horsemen and came pelting after you to save you, in the interest of his own skin, of course, but he got there too late—too late to keep them from killing Suleiman, and too late to kill you."

"But what—"

"Look at it from his viewpoint, man! If he'd gotten there in time to keep any one from being killed, it would have been all right. But with Suleiman killed by his men, he dares not leave you alive. He knows the English will hold him responsible for Suleiman's death, if they learn the true circumstances. And he knows what it means to murder a British subject—especially one as important in the secret service as I happen to know Suleiman was. But if he could put you out of the way, he could swear I killed you and Suleiman. Those men out there are all Baber's personal following—hard-bitten old wolves who'll cut any throat and swear any lie he orders. If you go back to Kabul and tell your story, Baber will be in bad with the Amir, the British, and Afdal Khan. So he's determined to shut your mouth, for good and all."

WILLOUGHBY was silent for a moment; presently he said frankly: "Gordon, if I didn't have such a high respect for your wits, I'd believe you. It all sounds reasonable and logical. But damn it, man, I don't know whether I'm recognizing logic or simply being twisted up in a web of clever lies. You're too dangerously subtle, Gordon, for me to allow myself to believe anything you say, without proof."

"Proof?" retorted Gordon grimly, "Listen!"

Wriggling toward the cave mouth he took shelter

behind a broken rock and shouted in *Pashtu*: "Ohai, Baber Ali!"

The scattered firing ceased instantly, and the moonlit night seemed to hold its breath. Baber Ali's voice came back, edged with suspicion.

"Speak, El Borak! I hearken."

"If I gave you the Englishman will you let me and my men go in peace?" Gordon called.

"Aye, by the beard of Allah!" came the eager answer.

"But I fear he will return to Kabul and poison the Amir against me!"

"Then kill him and throw his head out," answered Baber Ali with an oath. "By Allah, it is no more than I will do for him, the prying dog!"

In the cave Willoughby murmured: "I apologize, Gordon!"

"Well?" The old Pathan was growing impatient. "Are you playing with me, El Borak? Give me the Englishman!"

"Nay, Baber Ali, I dare not trust your promise," replied Gordon.

A bloodthirsty yell and a burst of frenzied firing marked the conclusion of the brief parley, and Gordon hugged the shelter of the shattered boulders until the spasm subsided. Then he crawled back to Willoughby.

"You see?"

"I see! It looks like I'm in this thing to the hilt with you! But why Baber Ali should have been so enraged because I failed to arrange a truce—"

"He and Afdal intended taking advantage of any truce you arranged, to trap me, just as I warned you. They were using you as a cat's-paw. They know they're licked, unless they resort to something of the sort."

There followed a period of silence, in which Willoughby was moved to inquire: "What now? Are we to

stay here until they starve us out? The moon will set before many hours. They'll rush us in the dark."

"I never walk into a trap I can't get out of," answered Gordon. "I'm just waiting for the moon to dip behind that crag and get its light out of the cave. There's an exit I don't believe the Orakzai know about. Just a narrow crack at the back of the cave. I enlarged it with a hunting knife and a rifle barrel before you recovered consciousness. It's big enough for a man to slip through now. It leads out onto a ledge fifty feet above a ravine. Some of the Orakzai may be down there watching the ledge, but I doubt it. From the plain out there it would be a long, hard climb around to the back of the mountain. We'll go down on a rope made of turbans and belts, and head for Akbar's Castle. We'll have to go on foot. It's only a few miles away, but the way we'll have to go is over the mountains, and a devil's own climb."

Slowly the moon moved behind the crag, and the silver sword no longer glimmered along the rocky floor. The men in the cavern could move about without being seen by the men outside, who waited the setting of the moon with the grim patience of gray wolves.

"All right, let's go," muttered Gordon. "Khoda Khan, lead the way. I'll follow when you're all through the cleft. If anything happens to me, take the *sahib* to Akbar's Castle. Go over the ridges; there may be ambushes already planted in the valleys."

"Give me a gun," requested Willoughby. The rifle of the dead Ahmed Khan was pressed into his hand. He followed the shadowy, all-but-invisible file of Afridis as they glided into the deeper darkness in the recesses of the tunnel-like cavern. Their sandals made no noise on the rocky floor, but the crunch of his boots seemed loud to the Englishman. Behind them Gordon lay near the entrance, and once he fired a shot at the boulders on the plain.

WITHIN fifty feet the cavern floor began to narrow and pitch upward. Above them a star shone in utter blackness, marking the crevice in the rock. It seemed to Willoughby that they mounted the slanting incline for a long way; the firing outside sounded muffled, and the patch of moonlight that was the cave mouth looked small with distance. The pitch became steeper, mounting up until the taller of the Afridis bent their heads to avoid the rocky roof. An instant later they reached the wall that marked the end of the cavern and glimpsed the sky through the narrow slit.

One by one they squeezed through, Willoughby last. He came out on a ledge in the starlight that overhung a ravine which was a mass of black shadows. Above them the great black crags loomed, shutting off the moonlight; everything on that side of the mountain was in shadow.

His companions clustered at the rim of the shelf as they swiftly and deftly knotted together girdles and unwound turbans to make a rope. One end was tossed over the ledge and man after man went down swiftly and silently, vanishing into the black ravine below. Willoughby helped a stalwart tribesman called Muhammad hold the rope as Khoda Khan went down. Before he went, Khoda Khan thrust his head back through the cleft and whistled softly, a signal to carry only to El Borak's alert ears.

Khoda Khan vanished into the darkness below, and Muhammad signified that he could hold the rope alone while Willoughby descended. Behind them an occasional muffled shot seemed to indicate that the Orakzai were yet unaware that their prey was escaping them.

Willoughby let himself over the ledge, hooked a leg about the rope and went down, considerably slower and more cautiously than the men who had preceded him. Above him the huge Afridi braced his legs and held the rope as firmly as though it were bound to a tree.

Willoughby was halfway down when he heard a murmur of voices on the ledge above which indicated that Gordon had come out of the cave and joined Muhammad. The Englishman looked down and made out the dim figures of the others standing below him on the ravine floor. His feet were a yard above the earth when a rifle cracked in the shadows and a red tongue of flame spat upward. An explosive grunt sounded above him and the rope went slack in his hands. He hit the ground, lost his footing and fell headlong, rolling aside as Muhammad came tumbling down. The giant struck the earth with a thud, wrapped about with the rope he had carried with him in his fall. He never moved after he landed.

Willoughby struggled up, breathless, as his companions charged past him. Knives were flickering in the shadows, dim figures reeling in locked combat. So the Orakzai had known of this possible exit! Men were fighting all around him. Gordon sprang to the rim of the ledge and fired downward without apparent aim, but a man grunted and fell, his rifle striking against Willoughby's boot. A dim, bearded face loomed out of the darkness, snarling like a ghou. Willoughby caught a swinging tulwar on his rifle barrel, wincing at the jolt that ran through his fingers, and fired full into the beared face.

"El Borak!" howled Khoda Khan, hacking and slashing at something that snarled and gasped like a wild beast.

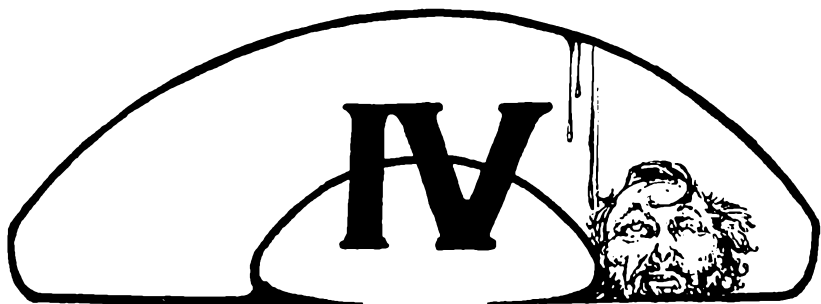
"Take the *sahib* and go!" yelled Gordon.

Willoughby realized that the fall of Muhammad with the rope had trapped Gordon on the ledge fifty feet above them.

"Nay!" shrieked Khoda Khan. "We will cast the rope up to thee—"

"Go, blast you!" roared Gordon. "The whole horde will be on your necks any minute! Go!"

The next instant Willoughby was seized under each arm and hustled at a stumbling run down the dark gorge. Men panted on each side of him, and the dripping tulwars in their hands smeared his breeches. He had a vague glimpse of three figures sprawling at the foot of the cliff, one horribly mangled. No one barred their path as they fled; Gordon's Afridis were obeying his command; but they had left their leader behind, and they sobbed curses through their teeth as they ran.



GORDON wasted no time. He knew he could not escape from the ledge without a rope, by climbing either up or down, and he did not believe his enemies could reach the ledge from the ravine. He squirmed back through the cleft and ran down the slant of the cavern, expecting any instant to see his besiegers pouring into the moonlit mouth. But it stood empty, and the rifles outside kept up their irregular monotone. Obviously, Baber Ali did not realize that his victims had attempted an escape by the rear. The muffled shots he must surely have heard had imparted no meaning to him, or perhaps he considered they but constituted some trickery of El Borak's. Knowledge that an opponent is full of dangerous ruses is often a handicap, instilling an undue amount of caution.

Anyway, Baber Ali had neither rushed the cavern nor sent any appreciable number of men to reinforce

the lurkers on the other side of the mountain, for the volume of his firing was undiminished. That meant he did not know of the presence of his men behind the cave. Gordon was inclined to believe that what he had taken for a strategically placed force had been merely a few restless individuals skulking along the ravine, scouting on their own initiative. He had actually seen only three men, had merely assumed the presence of others. The attack, too, had been ill-timed and poorly executed. It had neither trapped them all on the ledge nor in the ravine. The shot that killed Muhammad had doubtless been aimed at himself.

Gordon admitted his mistake; confused in the darkness as to the true state of things, he had ordered instant flight when his companions might safely have lingered long enough to tie a stone to the end of the rope and cast it back up to him. He was neatly trapped and it was largely his own fault.

But he had one advantage: Baber did not know he was alone in the cavern. And there was every reason to believe that Willoughby would reach Akbar's Castle unpursued. He fired a shot into the plain and settled himself comfortably behind the rocks near the cave mouth, his rifle at his shoulder.

The moonlit plateau showed no evidence of the attackers beyond the puffs of grayish-white smoke that bloomed in woolly whorls from behind the boulders. But there was a tense expectancy in the very air. The moon was visible below the overhanging crag; it rested a red, bent horn on the solid black mass of a mountain wall. In a few moments the plain would be plunged in darkness and then it was inevitable that Baber would rush the cavern.

Yet Baber would know that in the darkness following the setting of the moon the captives might be expected to make a break for liberty. It was certain that he already had a wide cordon spread across the plain,

and the line would converge quickly on the cave mouth. The longer Gordon waited after moonset, the harder it would be to slip through the closing semicircle.

He began wrenching bullets out of cartridges with his fingers and teeth and emptying the powder into his rifle barrel, even while he studied the terrain by the last light of the sinking moon. The plateau was roughly fan-shaped, widening rapidly from the cliff-flanked wall in which opened the cave mouth. Perhaps a quarter of a mile across the plain showed the dark mouth of a gorge, in which he knew were tethered the horses of the Orakzai. Probably at least one man was guarding them.

The plain ran level and bare for nearly a hundred yards before the cavern mouth, but some fifty feet away, on the right, there was a deep narrow gully which began abruptly in the midst of the plain and meandered away toward the right-hand cliffs. No shot had been fired from this ravine. If an Orakzai was hidden there he had gone into it while Gordon and his men were at the back of the cavern. It had been too close to the cave for the besiegers to reach it under the guns of the defenders.

As soon as the moon set Gordon intended to emerge and try to work his way across the plain, avoiding the Orakzai as they rushed toward the cave. It would be touch and go, the success depending on accurate timing and a good bit of luck. But there was no other alternative. He would have a chance, once he got among the rocks and gullies. His biggest risk would be that of getting shot as he ran from the cavern, with thirty rifles trained upon the black mouth. And he was providing against that when he filled his rifle barrel to the muzzle with loose powder from the broken cartridges and plugged the muzzle solidly with a huge misshapen slug he found on the cave floor.

He knew as soon as the moon vanished they would come wriggling like snakes from every direction, to cover the last few yards in a desperate rush—they would not fire until they could empty their guns point-blank into the cavern and storm in after their volley with naked steel. But thirty pairs of keen eyes would be fixed on the entrance and a volley would meet any shadowy figure seen darting from it.

THE MOON sank, plunging the plateau into darkness, relieved but little by the dim light of the stars. Out on the plateau Gordon heard sounds that only razor-keen ears could have caught, much less translated: the scruff of leather on stone, the faint clink of steel, the rattle of a pebble underfoot.

Rising in the black cave mouth he cocked his rifle, and poising himself for an instant, hurled it, butt first, as far to the left as he could throw it. The clash of the steel-shod butt on stone was drowned by a blinding flash of fire and a deafening detonation as the pent-up charge burst the heavy barrel asunder and in the intensified darkness that followed the flash Gordon was out of the cave and racing for the ravine on his right.

No bullet followed him, though rifles banged on the heels of that amazing report. As he had planned, the surprising explosion from an unexpected quarter had confused his enemies, wrenched their attention away from the cave mouth and the dim figure that flitted from it. Men howled with amazement and fired blindly and unreasoningly in the direction of the flash and roar. While they howled and fired. Gordon reached the gully and plunged into it almost without checking his stride—to collide with a shadowy figure which grunted and grappled with him.

In an instant Gordon's hands locked on a hairy throat, stifling the betraying yell. They went down together, and a rifle, useless in such desperate close

•GEOFFREY•WILLOUGHBY• AND •FRANCIS•XAVIER•GORDON•



Mr. Kuller
71.



HE CROUCHED ABOVE
HIS VICTIM, LISTENING...

quarters, fell from the Pathan's hand. Out on the plain pandemonium had burst, but Gordon was occupied with the blood-crazy savage beneath him.

The man was taller and heavier than himself and his sinews were like rawhide strands, but the advantage was with the tigerish white man. As they rolled on the gully floor the Pathan strove in vain with both hands to tear away the fingers that were crushing the life from his corded throat, then still clawing at Gordon's wrist with his left hand, began to grope in his girdle for a knife. Gordon released his throat with his left hand, and with it caught the other's right wrist just as the knife came clear.

The Pathan heaved and bucked like a wild man, straining his wolfish muscles to the utmost, but in vain. He could not free his knife wrist from Gordon's grasp nor tear from his throat the fingers that were bending his neck back until his bearded chin jutted upward. Desperately, he threw himself sideways, trying to bring his knee up to the American's groin, but his shift in position gave Gordon the leverage he had been seeking.

Instantly El Borak twisted the Pathan's wrist with such savage strength that a bone cracked and the knife fell from the numb fingers. Gordon released the broken wrist, snatched a knife from his own boot and ripped upward—again, again, and yet again.

Not until the convulsive struggles ceased and the body went limp beneath him did Gordon release the hairy throat. He crouched above his victim, listening. The fight had been swift, fierce and silent, enduring only a matter of seconds.

The unexpected explosion had loosed hysteria in the attackers. The Orakzai were rushing the cave, not in stealth and silence, but yelling so loudly and shooting so wildly they did not seem to realize that no shots were answering them.

Nerves hung on hair triggers can be snapped by an

untoward occurrence. The rush of the warriors across the plain sounded like the stampede of cattle. A man bounded up the ravine a few yards from where Gordon crouched, without seeing the American in the pit-like blackness. Howling, cursing, shooting blindly, the hill-men stormed to the cave mouth, too crazy with excitement and confused by the darkness to see the dim figure that glided out of the gully behind them and raced silently away toward the mouth of the distant gorge.



WILLOUGHBY always remembered that flight over the mountains as a sort of nightmare in which he was hustled along by ragged goblins through black defiles, up tendon-straining slopes and along knife-edge ridges which fell away on either hand into depths that turned him faint with nausea. Protests, exhortations and fervent profanity did not serve to ease the flying pace at which his escort was trundling him, and presently he had no breath for protests. He did not even have time to be grateful that the expected pursuit did not seem to be materializing.

He gasped like a dying fish and tried not to look down. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the Afridis blamed him for Gordon's plight and would gladly have heaved him off a ridge but for their leader's parting command.

But Willoughby felt that he was just as effectually being killed by overexertion. He had never realized

that human beings could traverse such a path—or rather such a pathless track—as he was being dragged over. When the moon sank the going was even harder, but he was grateful, for the abysses they seemed to be continually skirting were but floating gulfs of blackness beneath them, which did not induce the sick giddiness resulting from yawning chasms disclosed by the merciless moonlight.

His respect for Gordon's physical abilities increased to a kind of frantic awe, for he knew the American was known to be superior in stamina and endurance even to these long-legged, barrel-chested, iron-muscle mountaineers who seemed built of some substance that was tireless. Willoughby wished they would tire. They hauled him along with a man at each arm, and one to pull, and another to push when necessary, but even so the exertion was killing him. Sweat bathed him, drenching his garments. His thighs trembled and the calves of his legs were tied into agonizing knots.

He reflected in dizzy fragments that Gordon deserved whatever domination he had achieved over these iron-jawed barbarians. But mostly he did not think at all. His faculties were all occupied in keeping his feet and gulping air. The veins in his temples were nearly bursting and things were swimming in a bloody haze about him when he realized his escort, or captors—or torturers—had slowed to a walk. He voiced an incoherent croak of gratitude and shaking the sweat out of his dilated eyes, he saw that they were treading a path that ran over a natural rock bridge which spanned a deep gorge. Ahead of him, looming above a cluster of broken peaks, he saw a great black bulk heaving up against the stars like a misshapen castle.

The sharp challenge of a rifleman rang staccato from the other end of the span and was answered by Khoda Khan's bull-like bellow. The path led upon a



AKBAR'S
CASTLE

jutting ledge and half a dozen ragged, bearded specters with rifles in their hands rose from behind a rampart of heaped-up boulders.

Willoughby was in a state of collapse, able only to realize that the killing grind was over. The Afridis half carried, half dragged him within the semicircular rampart and he saw a bronze door standing open and a doorway cut in solid rock that glowed luridly. It required an effort to realize that the glow came from a fire burning somewhere in the cavern into which the doorway led.

This, then, was Akbar's Castle. With each arm across a pair of brawny shoulders Willoughby tottered through the cleft and down a short narrow tunnel, to emerge into a broad natural chamber lighted by smoky torches and a small fire over which tea was brewing and meat cooking. Half a dozen men sat about the fire, and some forty more slept on the stone floor, wrapped in their sheepskin coats. Doorways opened from the huge main chamber, openings of other tunnels or cell-like niches, and at the other end there were stalls occupied by horses, a surprising number of them. Saddles, blanket rolls, bridles and other equipment, with stands of rifles and stacks of ammunition cases, littered the floor near the walls.

THE MEN about the fire rose to their feet looking inquiringly at the Englishman and his escort, and the men on the floor awoke and sat up blinking like ghouls surprised by daylight. A tall broad-shouldered swash-buckler came striding out of the widest doorway opening into the cavern. He paused before the group, towering half a head taller than any other man there, hooked his thumbs in his girdle and glared balefully.

"Who is this *feringhi*?" he snarled suspiciously. "Where is El Borak?"

Three of the escort backed away apprehensively,

but Khoda Khan, held his ground and answered: "This is the *sahib* Willoughby, whom El Borak met at the Minaret of Shaitan, Yar Ali Khan. We rescued him from Baber Ali, who would have slain him. We were at bay in the cave where Yar Muhammad shot the gray wolf three summers ago. We stole out by a cleft, but the rope fell and left El Borak on a ledge fifty feet above us, and—"

"Allah!" It was a blood-curdling yell from Yar Ali Khan who seemed transformed into a maniac. "Dogs! You left him to die! Accursed ones! Forgotten of God! I'll—"

"He commanded us to bring this Englishman to Akbar's Castle," maintained Khoda Khan doggedly. "We tore our beards and wept, but we obeyed!"

"Allah!" Yar Ali Khan became a whirlwind of energy. He snatched up rifle, bandoleer and bridle. "Bring out the horses and saddle them!" he roared and a score of men scurried. "Hasten! Forty men with me to rescue El Borak! The rest hold the Castle. I leave Khoda Khan in command."

"Leave the devil in command of hell," quoth Khoda Khan profanely. "I ride with you to rescue El Borak—or I empty my rifle into your belly."

His three comrades expressed similar intentions at the top of their voices—after fighting and running all night, they were wild as starving wolves to plunge back into hazard in behalf of their chief.

"Go or stay, I care not!" howled Yar Ali Khan, tearing out a fistful of his beard in his passion. "If Borak is slain I will requite thee, by the prophet's beard and my feet! Allah rot me if I ram not a rifle stock down thy accursed gullets—dogs, jackals, noseless abominations, hasten with the horses!"

"Yar Ali Khan!" It was a yell from beyond the arch whence the tall Afridi had first emerged. "One comes riding hard up the valley!"

Yar Ali Khan yelled bloodthirstily and rushed into the tunnel, brandishing his rifle, with everybody pelting after him except the men detailed to saddle the horses.

Willoughby had been forgotten by the Pathans in the madhouse brewed by Gordon's lieutenant. He limped after them, remembering tales told of this gaunt giant and his berserk rages. The tunnel down which the ragged horde was streaming ran for less than a hundred feet when it widened to a mouth through which the gray light of dawn was stealing. Through this the Afridis were pouring, and Willoughby, following them, came out upon a broad ledge a hundred feet wide and fifty deep, like a gallery before a house.

Around its semicircular rim ran a massive man-made wall, shoulder-high, pierced with loopholes slanting down. There was an arched opening in the wall, closed by a heavy bronze door, and from that door, which now stood open, a row of broad shallow steps niched in solid stone led down to a trail which in turn looped down a three-hundred-foot slope to the floor of a broad valley.

The cliffs in which the cave sat closed the western end of the valley, which opened to the east. Mists hung in the valley and out of them a horseman came flying, growing ghostlike out of the dimness of the dawn—a man on a great white horse, riding like the wind.

Yar Ali Khan glared wildly for an instant, then started forward with a convulsive leap of his whole body, flinging his rifle high above his head.

"El Borak!" he roared.

Electrified by his yell, the men surged to the wall and those saddling the mounts inside abandoned their task and rushed out onto the ledge. In an instant the wall was lined with tense figures, gripping their rifles and glaring into the white mists rolling beyond the flee-

ing rider, from which they momentarily expected pursuers to appear.

Willoughby, standing to one side like a spectator of a drama, felt a tingle in his veins at the sight and sound of the wild rejoicing with which these wild men greeted the man who had won their allegiance. Gordon was no bluffing adventurer; he was a real chief of men; and that, Willoughby realized, was going to make his own job that much harder.

NO PURSUERS materialized out of the thinning mists. Gordon urged his mount up the trail, up the broad steps, and as he rode through the gate, bending his head under the arch, the roar of acclaim that went up would have stirred the blood of a king. The Pathans swarmed around him, catching at his hands, his garments, shouting praise to Allah that he was alive and whole. He grinned down at them, swung off and threw his reins to the nearest man, from whom Yar Ali Khan instantly snatched them jealously, with a ferocious glare at the offending warrior.

Willoughby stepped forward. He knew he looked like a scarecrow in his stained and torn garments, but Gordon looked like a butcher, with blood dried on his shirt and smeared on his breeches where he had wiped his hands. But he did not seem to be wounded. He smiled at Willoughby for the first time.

“Tough trip, eh?”

“We’ve been here only a matter of minutes,” Willoughby acknowledged.

“You took a short cut. I came the long way, but I made good time on Baber Ali’s horse,” said Gordon.

“You mentioned possible ambushes in the valleys—”

“Yes. But on horseback I could take that risk. I was shot at once, but they missed me. It’s hard to aim straight in the early-morning mists.”

“How did you get away?”

“Waited until the moon went down, then made a break for it. Had to kill a man in the gully before the cave. We were all twisted together when I let him have the knife and that’s where this blood came from. I stole Baber’s horse while the Orakzai were storming the empty cave. Stampeded the herd down a canyon. Had to shoot the fellow guarding it. Baber’ll guess where I went, of course. He’ll be after me as quickly as he and his men can catch their horses. I suspect they’ll lay siege to the Castle, but they’ll only waste their time.”

Willoughby stared about him in the growing light of dawn, impressed by the strength of the stronghold. One rifleman could hold the entrance through which he had been brought. To try to advance along that narrow bridge that spanned the chasm behind the Castle would be suicide for an enemy. And no force on earth could march up the valley on this side and climb that stair in the teeth of Gordon’s rifles. The mountain which contained the cave rose up like a huge stone citadel above the surrounding heights. The cliffs which flanked the valley were lower than the fortified ledge; men crawling along them would be exposed to a raking fire from above. Attack could come from no other direction.

“This is really in Afdal Khan’s territory,” said Gordon. “It used to be a Mogul outpost, as the name implies. It was first fortified by Akbar himself. Afdal Khan held it before I took it. It’s my best safeguard for Kurram.

“After the outlying villages were burned on both sides, all my people took refuge in Kurram, just as Afdal’s did in Khoruk. To attack Kurram, Afdal would have to pass Akbar’s Castle and leave me in his rear. He doesn’t dare do that. That’s why he wanted a truce—to get me out of the Castle. With me ambushed and killed, or hemmed up in Kurram, he’d be free to strike at Kurram with all his force, without being afraid I’d

burn Khoruk behind him or ambush him in my country.

"He's too cautious of his own skin. I've repeatedly challenged him to fight me man to man, but he pays no attention. He hasn't stirred out of Khoruk since the feud started, unless he had at least a hundred men with him—as many as I have in my entire force, counting these here and those guarding the women and children in Kurram."

"You've done a terrible amount of damage with so small a band," said Willoughby.

"Not difficult if you know the country, have men who trust you, and keep moving. Geronimo almost whipped an army with a handful of Apaches, and I was raised in his country. I've simply adopted his tactics. The possession of this Castle was all I needed to assure my ultimate victory. If Afdal had the guts to meet me, the feud would be over. He's the chief; the others just follow him. As it is I may have to wipe out the entire Khoruk clan. But I'll get him."

The dark flame flickered in Gordon's eyes as he spoke, and again Willoughby felt the impact of an inexorable determination, elemental in its foundations. And again he swore mentally that he would end the feud himself, in his own way, with Afdal Khan alive; though how, he had not the faintest idea at present.

Gordon glanced at him closely and advised: "Better get some sleep. If I know Baber Ali, he'll come straight to the Castle after me. He knows he can't take it, but he'll try anyway. He has at least a hundred men who follow him and take orders from nobody else—not even Afdal Khan. After the shooting starts there won't be much chance for sleeping. You look a bit done up."

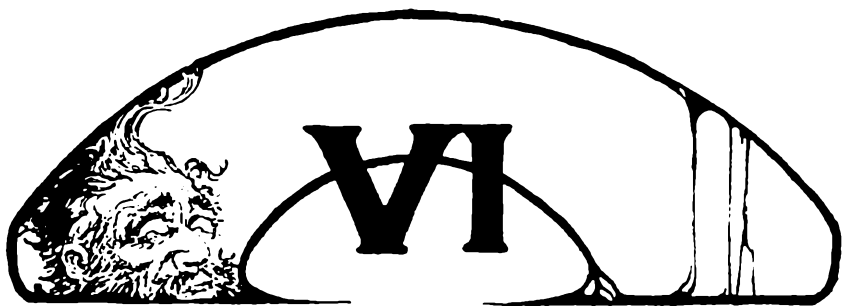
Willoughby realized the truth of Gordon's comment. Sight of the white streak of dawn stealing over the ash-hued peaks weighted his eyelids with an irresistible drowsiness. He was barely able to stumble into the

cave, and the smell of frying mutton exercised no charm to keep him awake. Somebody steered him to a heap of blankets and he was asleep before he was actually stretched upon them.

Gordon stood looking down at the sleeping man enigmatically and Yar Ali Khan came up as noiselessly and calmly as a gaunt gray wolf; it would have been hard to believe he was the same hurricane of emotional upset which had stormed all over the cavern a short hour before.

"Is he a friend, *sahib*?"

"A better friend than he realizes," was Gordon's grim, cryptic reply. "I think Afdal Khan's friends will come to curse the day Geoffrey Willoughby ever came into the hills."



AGAIN it was the spiteful cracking of rifles which awakened Willoughby. He sat up, momentarily confused and unable to remember where he was or how he came there. Then he recalled the events of the night; he was in the stronghold of an outlaw chief, and those detonations must mean the siege Gordon had predicted. He was alone in the great cavern, except for the horses munching fodder beyond the bars at the other end. Among them he recognized the big white stallion that had belonged to Baber Ali.

The fire had died to a heap of coals and the daylight that stole through a couple of arches, which were the openings of tunnels connecting with the outer air, was

augmented by half a dozen antique-looking bronze lamps.

A pot of mutton stew simmered over the coals and a dish full of *chupatties* stood near it. Willoughby was aware of a ravenous hunger and he set to without delay. Having eaten his fill and drunk deeply from a huge gourd which hung nearby, full of sweet, cool water, he rose and started toward the tunnel through which he had first entered the Castle.

Near the mouth he almost stumbled over an incongruous object—a large telescope mounted on a tripod, and obviously modern and expensive. A glance out on the ledge showed him only half a dozen warriors sitting against the rampart, their rifles across their knees. He glanced at the ribbon of stone that spanned the deep gorge and shivered as he remembered how he had crossed it in the darkness. It looked scarcely a foot wide in places. He turned back, crossed the cavern and traversed the other tunnel.

He halted in the outer mouth. The wall that rimmed the ledge was lined with Afridis, kneeling or lying at the loopholes. They were not firing. Gordon leaned idly against the bronze door, his head in plain sight of any one who might be in the valley below. He nodded a greeting as Willoughby advanced and joined him at the door. Again the Englishman found himself a member of a besieged force, but this time the advantage was all with the defenders.

Down in the valley, out of effectual rifle range, a long skirmish line of men was advancing very slowly on foot, firing as they came, and taking advantage of every bit of cover. Farther back, small in the distance, a large herd of horses grazed, watched by men who sat cross-legged in the shade of the cliff. The position of the sun indicated that the day was well along toward the middle of the afternoon.

"I've slept longer than I thought," Willoughby remarked. "How long has this firing been going on?"

"Ever since noon. They're wasting Russian car-

tridges scandalously. But you slept like a dead man. Baber Ali didn't get here as quickly as I thought he would. He evidently stopped to round up more men. There are at least a hundred down there."

To Willoughby the attack seemed glaringly futile. The men on the ledge were too well protected to suffer from the long-range firing. And before the attackers could get near enough to pick out the loopholes, the bullets of the Afridis would be knocking them over like tenpins. He glimpsed men crawling among the boulders on the cliffs, but they were at the same disadvantage as the men in the valley below—Gordon's riflemen had a vantage point above them.

"What can Baber Ali hope for?" he asked.

"He's desperate. He knows you're up here with me and he's taking a thousand-to-one chance. But he's wasting his time. I have enough ammunition and food to stand a six-month siege; there's a spring in the cavern."

"Why hasn't Afdal Khan kept you hemmed up here with part of his men while he stormed Kurram with the rest of his force?"

"Because it would take his whole force to storm Kurram; its defenses are almost as strong as these. Then he has a dread of having me at his back. Too big a risk that his men couldn't keep me cooped up. He's got to reduce Akbar's Castle before he can strike at Kurram."

"The devil!" said Willoughby irritably, brought back to his own situation. "I came to arbitrate this feud and now I find myself a prisoner. I've got to get out of here—got to get back to Ghazrael."

"I'm as anxious to get you out as you are to go," answered Gordon. "If you're killed I'm sure to be blamed for it. I don't mind being outlawed for the things I have done, but I don't care to shoulder something I didn't do."

"Couldn't I slip out of here tonight? By way of the bridge—"

"There are men on the other side of the gorge, watching for just such a move. Baber Ali means to close your mouth if human means can do it."

"If Afdal Khan knew what's going on he'd come and drag the old ruffian off my neck," growled Willoughby. "Afdal knows he can't afford to let his clan kill an Englishman. But Baber will take good care Afdal doesn't know, of course. If I could get a letter to him—but of course that's impossible."

"We can try it, though," returned Gordon. "You write the note. Afdal knows your handwriting, doesn't he? Good! Tonight I'll sneak out and take it to his nearest outpost. He keeps a line of patrols among the hills a few miles beyond Jehungir's Well."

"But if I can't slip out, how can you—"

"I can do it all right, alone. No offense, but you Englishmen sound like a herd of longhorn steers at your stealthiest. The Orakzai are among the crags on the other side of the Gorge of Mekram. I won't cross the bridge. My men will let me down a rope ladder into the gorge tonight before moonrise. I'll slip up to the camp of the nearest outpost, wrap the note around a pebble and throw it among them. Being Afdal's men and not Baber's, they'll take it to him. I'll come back the way I went, after moonset. It'll be safe enough."

"But how safe will it be for Afdal Khan when he comes for me?"

"You can tell Afdal Khan he won't be harmed if he plays fair," Gordon answered. "But you'd better make some arrangements so you can see him and know he's there before you trust yourself outside this cave. And there's the pinch, because Afdal won't dare show himself for fear I'd shoot him. He's broken so many pacts himself he can't believe anybody would keep one. Not where his hide is concerned. He trusted me to keep my word in regard to Baber and your escort, but would he trust himself to my promise?"

Willoughby scowled, cramming the bowl of his pipe. "Wait!" he said suddenly. "I saw a big telescope in the cavern, mounted on a tripod—is it in working order?"

"I should say it is. I imported that from Germany, by the way of Turkey and Persia. That's one reason Akbar's Castle has never been surprised. It carries for miles."

"Does Afdal Khan know of it?"

"I'm sure he does."

"Good!"

SEATING HIMSELF on the ledge, Willoughby drew forth pencil and notebook, propped the latter against his knee, and wrote in his clear concise hand:

AFDAL KHAN: I am at Akbar's Castle, now being besieged by your uncle, Baber Ali. Baber was so unreasonably incensed at my failure to effect a truce that he allowed my servant Suleiman to be murdered, and now intends murdering me, to stop my mouth.

I don't have to remind you how fatal it would be to the interests of your party for this to occur. I want you to come to Akbar's Castle and get me out of this. Gordon assures me you will not be molested if you play fair, but here is a way by which you need not feel you are taking any chances: Gordon has a large telescope through which I can identify you while you are still out of rifle range. In the Gorge of Mekram, and southwest of the Castle, there is a mass of boulders split off from the right wall and well out of rifle range from the Castle. If you were to come and stand on those boulders, I could identify you easily.

Naturally, I will not leave the Castle until I know you are present to protect me from your uncle. As soon as I have identified you, I will come down the gorge alone. You can watch me all the way and assure yourself that no treachery is intended. No one but myself will leave the Castle. On your part I do not wish any of your men to advance beyond the boulders and I will not answer for their safety if they should, as I intend to safeguard Gordon in this matter as well as yourself.

GEOFFREY WILLOUGHBY

He handed the letter over for Gordon to read.

The American nodded. "That may bring him. I don't know. He's kept out of my sight ever since the feud started."

Then ensued a period of waiting, in which the sun seemed sluggishly to crawl toward the western peaks. Down in the valley and on the cliffs the Orakzai kept up their fruitless firing with a persistency that convinced Willoughby of the truth of Gordon's assertion that ammunition was being supplied them by some European power.

The Afridis were not perturbed. They lounged at ease by the wall, laughed, joked, chewed jerked mutton and fired through the slanting loopholes when the Orakzai crept too close. Three still white-clad forms in the valley and one on the cliffs testified to their accuracy. Willoughby realized that Gordon was right when he said the clan which held Akbar's Castle was certain to win the war eventually. Only a desperate old savage like Baber Ali would waste time and men trying to take it. Yet the Orakzai had originally held it. How Gordon had gained possession of it Willoughby could not imagine.

The sun dipped at last; the Himalayan twilight deepened into black-velvet, star-veined dusk. Gordon rose, a vague figure in the starlight.

"Time for me to be going."

He had laid aside his rifle and buckled a tulwar to his hip. Willoughby followed him into the great cavern, now dim and shadowy in the light of the bronze lamps, and through the narrow tunnel and the bronze door.

Yar Ali Khan, Khoda Khan, and half a dozen others followed them. The light from the cavern stole through the tunnel, vaguely etching the moving figures of the men. Then the bronze door was closed softly and Willoughby's companions were shapeless blurs in the

thick soft darkness around him. The gorge below was a floating river of blackness. The bridge was a dark streak that ran into the unknown and vanished. Not even the keenest eyes of the hills, watching from beyond the gorge, could have even discerned the jut of the ledge under the black bulk of the Castle, much less the movements of the men upon it.

The voices of the men working at the rim of the ledge were low and murmurous as the whispering of the night breezes. Willoughby sensed rather than saw that they were lowering the rope ladder—a hundred and fifty feet of it—into the gorge. Gordon's face was a light blur in the darkness. Willoughby groped for his hand and found him already swinging over the rampart onto the ladder, one end of which was made fast to a great iron ring set in the stone of the ledge.

“Gordon, I feel like a bounder, letting you take this risk for me. Suppose some of those devils are down there in the gorge?”

“Not much chance. They don't know we have this way of coming and going. If I can steal a horse, I'll be back in the Castle before dawn. If I can't, and have to make the whole trip there and back on foot, I may have to hide out in the hills tomorrow and get back into the Castle the next night. Don't worry about me. They'll never see me. Yar Ali Khan, watch for a rush before the moon rises.”

“Aye, *sahib*.” The bearded giant's undisturbed manner reassured Willoughby.

The next instant Gordon began to melt into the gloom below. Before he had climbed down five rungs the men crouching on the rampart could no longer see him. He made no sound in his descent. Khoda Khan knelt with a hand on the ropes, and as soon as he felt them go slack, he began to haul the ladder up. Willoughby leaned over the edge, straining his ears to

catch some sound from below—scruff of leather, rattle of shale—he heard nothing.

Yar Ali Khan muttered, his beard brushing Wiloughby's ear: "Nay, *sahib*, if such ears as yours could hear him, every Orakzai on this side of the mountain would know a man stole down the gorge! You will not hear him—nor will they. There are Lifters of the Khyber who can steal rifles out of the tents of the British soldiers, but they are blundering cattle compared to El Borak. Before dawn a wolf will howl in the gorge, and we will know El Borak has returned and will let down the ladder for him."

But like the others, the huge Afridi leaned over the rampart listening intently for some fifteen minutes after the ladder had been drawn up. Then with a gesture to the others he turned and opened the bronze door a crack. They stole through hurriedly. Somewhere in the blackness across the gorge a rifle cracked flatly and lead spanged a foot or so above the lintel. In spite of the rampart some quick eye among the crags had caught the glow of the opened door. But it was blind shooting. The sentries left on the ledge did not reply.

BACK on the ledge that overlooked the valley, Wiloughby noted an air of expectancy among the warriors at the loopholes. They were momentarily expecting the attack of which Gordon had warned them.

"How did Gordon ever take Akbar's Castle?" Wiloughby asked Khoda Khan, who seemed more ready to answer questions than any of the other taciturn warriors.

The Afridi squatted beside him near the open bronze gate, rifle in hand, the butt resting on the ledge. Over them was the blue-black bowl of the Himalayan night, flecked with clusters of frosty silver.

"He sent Yar Ali Khan with forty horsemen to make

a feint at Baber Ali's *sangar*," answered Khoda Khan promptly. "Thinking to trap us, Afdal drew all his men out of Akbar's Castle except three. Afdal believed three men could hold it against an army, and so they could—against an army. Not against El Borak. While Baber Ali and Afdal were striving to pin Yar Ali Khan and us forty riders between them, and we were leading the dogs a merry chase over the hills, El Borak rode alone down this valley. He came disguised as a Persian trader, with his turban awry and his rich garments dusty and rent. He fled down the valley shouting that thieves had looted his caravan and were pursuing him to take from him his purse of gold and his pouch of jewels.

"The accursed ones left to guard the Castle were greedy, and they saw only a rich and helpless merchant, to be looted. So they bade him take refuge in the cavern and opened the gate to him. He rode into Akbar's Castle crying praise to Allah—with empty hands, but a knife and pistols under his *khalat*. Then the accursed ones mocked him and set on him to strip him of his riches—by Allah they found they had caught a tiger in the guise of a lamb! One he slew with the knife, the other two he shot. Alone he took the stronghold against which armies have thundered in vain! When we forty-one horsemen evaded the Orakzai and doubled back, as it had been planned, lo! the bronze gate was open to us and we were lords of Akbar's Castle! Ha! The forgotten of God charge the stair!"

From the shadows below there welled up the sudden, swift drum of hoofs and Willoughby glimpsed movement in the darkness of the valley. The blurred masses resolved themselves into dim figures racing up the looping trail. At the same time a rattle of rifle fire burst out behind the Castle, from beyond the Gorge of Mekram. The Afridis displayed no excitement.

Khoda Khan did not even close the bronze gate. They held their fire until the hoofs of the foremost horses were ringing on the lower steps of the stair. Then a burst of flame crowned the wall, and in its flash Willoughby saw wild bearded faces, horses tossing heads and manes.

In the darkness following the volley there rose screams of agony from men and beasts, mingled with the thrashing and kicking of wounded horses and the grating of shod hoofs on stone as some of the beasts slid backward down the stair. Dead and dying piled in a heaving, agonized mass, and the stairs became a shambles as again and yet again the rippling volleys crashed.

Willoughby wiped a damp brow with a shaking hand, grateful that the hoofbeats were receding down the valley. The gasps and moans and cries which welled up from the ghastly heap at the foot of the stairs sickened him.

"They are fools," said Khoda Khan, levering fresh cartridges into his rifle. "Thrice in past attacks have they charged the stair by darkness, and thrice have we broken them. Baber Ali is a bull rushing blindly to his destruction."

Rifles began to flash and crack down in the valley as the baffled besiegers vented their wrath in blind discharges. Bullets smacked along the wall of the cliff, and Khoda Khan closed the bronze gate.

"Why don't they attack by way of the bridge?" Willoughby wondered.

"Doubtless they did. Did you not hear the shots? But the path is narrow and one man behind the rampart could keep it clear. And there are six men there, all skilled marksmen."

Willoughby nodded, remembering the narrow ribbon of rock flanked on either hand by echoing depths.

"Look, *sahib*, the moon rises."

Over the eastern peaks a glow began which grew to a soft golden fire against which the peaks stood blackly outlined. Then the moon rose, not the mellow gold globe promised by the forerunning luster, but a gaunt, red, savage moon, of the high Himalayas.

Khoda Khan opened the bronze gate and peered down the stair, grunting softly in gratification. Willoughby, looking over his shoulder, shuddered. The heap at the foot of the stairs was no longer a merciful blur, for the moon outlined it in pitiless detail. Dead horses and dead men lay in a tangled gory mound with rifles and sword blades thrust out of the pile like weeds growing out of a scrap heap. There must have been at least a dozen horses and almost as many men in that shambles.

"A shame to waste good horses thus," muttered Khoda Khan. "Baber Ali is a fool." He closed the gate.

Willoughby leaned back against the wall, drawing a heavy sheepskin coat about him. He felt sick and futile. The men down in the valley must feel the same way, for the firing was falling off, becoming spasmodic. Even Baber Ali must realize the futility of the siege by this time. Willoughby smiled bitterly to himself. He had come to arbitrate a hill feud—and down there men lay dead in heaps. But the game was not yet played out. The thought of Gordon stealing through those black mountains out there somewhere discouraged sleep. Yet he did slumber at last, despite himself.

IT WAS Khoda Khan who shook him awake. Willoughby looked up blinking. Dawn was just whitening the peaks. Only a dozen men squatted at the loopholes. From the cavern stole the reek of coffee and frying meat.

"Your letter has been safely delivered, *sahib*."

"Eh? What's that? Gordon's returned?"

Willoughby rose stiffly, relieved that Gordon had

not suffered on his account. He glanced over the wall. Down the valley the camp of the raiders was veiled by the morning mists, but several strands of smoke oozed toward the sky. He did not look down the stair; he did not wish to see the cold faces of the dead in the white dawn light.

He followed Khoda Khan into the great chamber where some of the warriors were sleeping and some preparing breakfast. The Afridi gestured toward a cell-like niche where a man lay. He had his back to the door, but the black, close-cropped hair and dusty khakis were unmistakable.

"He is weary," said Khoda Khan. "He sleeps."

Willoughby nodded. He had begun to wonder if Gordon ever found it necessary to rest and sleep like ordinary men.

"It were well to go upon the ledge and watch for Afdal Khan," said Khoda Khan. "We have mounted the telescope there, *sahib*. One shall bring your breakfast to you there. We have no way of knowing when Afdal will come."

Out on the ledge the telescope stood on its tripod, projecting like a cannon over the rampart. He trained it on the mass of boulders down the ravine. The Gorge of Mekram ran from the north to the southwest. The boulders, called the Rocks, were more than a mile to the southwest of the Castle. Just beyond them the gorge bent sharply. A man could reach the Rocks from the southwest without being spied from the Castle, but he could not approach beyond them without being seen. Nor could any one leave the Castle from that side and approach the Rocks without being seen by any one hiding there.

The Rocks were simply a litter of huge boulders which had broken off from the canyon wall. Just now, as Willoughby looked, the mist floated about them, making them hazy and indistinct. Yet as he watched them they became more sharply outlined, growing out

of the thinning mist. And on the tallest rock there stood a motionless figure. The telescope brought it out in vivid clarity. There was no mistaking that tall, powerful figure. It was Afdal Khan who stood there, watching the Castle with a pair of binoculars.

"He must have got the letter early in the night, or ridden hard to get here this early," muttered Willoughby. "Maybe he was at some spot nearer than Khoruk. Did Gordon say?"

"No, *sahib*."

"Well, no matter. We won't wake Gordon. No, I won't wait for breakfast. Tell El Borak that I'm grateful for all the trouble he's taken in my behalf and I'll do what I can for him when I get back to Ghazrael. But he'd better decide to let this thing be arbitrated. I'll see that Afdal doesn't try any treachery."

"Yes, *sahib*."

They tossed the rope ladder into the gorge and it unwound swiftly as it tumbled down and dangled within a foot of the canyon floor. The Afridis showed their heads above the ramparts without hesitation, but when Willoughby mounted the rampart and stood in plain sight, he felt a peculiar crawling between his shoulders.

But no rifle spoke from the crags beyond the gorge. Of course, the sight of Afdal Khan was sufficient guarantee of his safety. Willoughby set a foot in the ladder and went down, refusing to look below him. The ladder tended to swing and spin after he had progressed a few yards and from time to time he had to steady himself with a hand against the cliff wall. But altogether it was not so bad, and presently he heaved a sigh of relief as he felt the rocky floor under his feet. He waved his arms, but the rope was already being drawn up swiftly. He glanced about him. If any bodies had fallen from the bridge in the night battle, they had been removed. He turned and walked down the gorge, toward the appointed rendezvous.

DAWN grew about him, the white mists changing to rosy pink, and swiftly dissipating. He could make out the outlines of the Rocks plainly now, without artificial aid, but he no longer saw Afdal Khan. Doubtless the suspicious chief was watching his approach from some hiding place. He kept listening for distant shots that would indicate Baber Ali was renewing the siege, but he heard none. Doubtless Baber Ali had already received orders from Afdal Khan, and he visualized Afdal's amazement and rage when he learned of his uncle's indiscretions.

He reached the Rocks—a great heap of rugged, irregular stones and broken boulders, towering thirty feet in the air in places.

He halted and called: "Afdal Khan!"

"This way, *sahib*," a voice answered. "Among the Rocks."

Willoughby advanced between a couple of jagged boulders and came into a sort of natural theater, made by the space inclosed between the overhanging cliff and the mass of detached rocks. Fifty men could have stood there without being crowded, but only one man was in sight—a tall, lusty man in early middle life, in turban and silken *khalat*. He stood with his head thrown back in unconscious arrogance, a broad tulwar in his hand.

The faint crawling between his shoulders that had accompanied Willoughby all the way down the gorge, in spite of himself, left him at the sight. When he spoke his voice was casual.

"I'm glad to see you, Afdal Khan."

"And I am glad to see you, *sahib*!" the Orakzai answered with a chill smile. He thumbed the razor-edge of his tulwar. "You have failed in the mission for which I brought you into these hills—but your death will serve me almost as well."

Had the Rocks burst into a roar about him the sur-

prise would have been no more shocking. Willoughby literally staggered with the impact of the stunning revelation.

"What? My death? Afdal, are you mad?"

"What will the English do to Baber Ali?" demanded the chief.

"They'll demand that he be tried for the murder of Suleiman," answered Willoughby.

"And the Amir would hang him, to placate the British!" Afdal Khan laughed mirthlessly. "But if you were dead, none would ever know! Bah! Do you think I would let my uncle be hanged for slaying that Punjabi dog? Baber was a fool to let his men take the Indian's life. I would have prevented it, had I known. But now it is done and I mean to protect him. El Borak is not so wise as I thought or he would have known that I would never let Baber be punished."

"It means ruin for you if you murder me," reminded Willoughby—through dry lips, for he read the murderous gleam in the Orakzai's eyes.

"Where are the witnesses to accuse me? There is none this side of the Castle save you and I. I have removed my men from the crags near the bridge. I sent them all into the valley—partly because I feared lest one might fire a hasty shot and spoil my plan, partly because I do not trust my own men any farther than I have to. Sometimes a man can be bribed or persuaded to betray even his chief.

"Before dawn I sent men to comb the gorge and these Rocks to make sure no trap had been set for me. Then I came here and sent them away and remained here alone. They do not know why I came. They shall never know. Tonight, when the moon rises, your head will be found in a sack at the foot of the stair that leads down from Akbar's Castle and there will be a hundred men to swear it was thrown down by El Borak.

"And because they will believe it themselves, none

can prove them liars. I want them to believe it themselves, because I know how shrewd you English are in discovering lies. I will send your head to Fort Ali Masjid, with fifty men to swear El Borak murdered you. The British will force the Amir to send an army up here, with field pieces, and shell El Borak out of my Castle. Who will believe him if he has the opportunity to say he did not slay you?"

"Gordon was right!" muttered Willoughby helplessly. "You are a treacherous dog. Would you mind telling me just why you forced this feud on him?"

"Not at all, since you will be dead in a few moments. I want control of the wells that dominate the caravan routes. The Russians will pay me a great deal of gold to help them smuggle rifles and ammunition down from Persia and Turkestan, into Afghanistan and Kashmir and India. I will help them, and they will help me. Some day they will make me Amir of Afghanistan."

"Gordon was right," was all Willoughby could say. "The man was right! And this truce you wanted—I suppose it was another trick?"

"Of course! I wanted to get El Borak out of my Castle."

"What a fool I've been," muttered Willoughby.

"Best make your peace with God than berate yourself, *sahib*," said Afdal Khan, beginning to swing the heavy tulwar to and fro, turning the blade so the edge gleamed in the early light. "There are only you and I and Allah to see—and Allah hates infidels! Steel is silent and sure—one stroke, swift and deadly, and your head will be mine to use as I wish—"

He advanced with the noiseless stride of the hill-man. Willoughby set his teeth and clenched his hands until the nails bit into the palms. He knew it was useless to run; the Orakzai would overtake him within half a dozen strides. It was equally futile to leap and grapple with his bare hands, but it was all he could do; death would smite him in mid-leap and there would be

a rush of darkness and an end of planning and working and all things hoped for—

“Wait a minute, Afdal Khan!”

THE VOICE was moderately pitched, but if it had been a sudden scream the effect could have been no more startling. Afdal Khan started violently and whirled about. He froze in his tracks and the tulwar slipped from his fingers. His face went ashen and slowly his hands rose above his shoulders.

Gordon stood in a cleft of the cleft, and a heavy pistol, held hip-high, menaced the chief's waistline. Gordon's expression was one of faint amusement, but a hot flame leaped and smoldered in his black eyes.

“El Borak!” stammered Afdal Khan dazedly. “El Borak!” Suddenly he cried out like a madman. “You are a ghost—a devil! The Rocks were empty—my men searched them—”

“I was hiding on a ledge on the cliff above their heads,” Gordon answered. “I entered the Rocks after they left. Keep your hands away from your girdle, Afdal Khan. I could have shot you any time within the last hour, but I wanted Willoughby to know you for the rogue you are.”

“But I saw you in the cave,” gasped Willoughby, “asleep in the cave—”

“You saw an Afridi, Ali Shah, in some of my clothes, pretending to be sleeping,” answered Gordon, never taking his eyes off Afdal Khan. “I was afraid if you knew I wasn't in the Castle, you'd refuse to meet Afdal, thinking I was up to something. So after I tossed your note into the Orakzai camp, I came back to the Castle while you were asleep, gave my men their orders and hid down the gorge.

“You see I knew Afdal wouldn't let Baber be punished for killing Suleiman. He couldn't if he wanted to. Baber has too many followers in the Khoruk clan. And

the only way of keeping the Amir's favor without handing Baber over for trial, would be to shut your mouth. He could always lay it onto me, then. I knew that note would bring him to meet you—and I knew he'd come prepared to kill you."

"He might have killed me," muttered Willoughby.

"I've had a gun trained on him ever since you came within range. If he'd brought men with him, I'd have shot him before you left the Castle. When I saw he meant to wait here alone, I waited for you to find out for yourself what kind of a dog he is. You've been in no danger."

"I thought he arrived early, to have come from Khoruk."

"I knew he wasn't at Khoruk when I left the Castle last night," said Gordon. "I knew when Baber found us safe in the Castle he'd make a clean breast of everything to Afdal—and that Afdal would come to help him. Afdal was camped half a mile back in the hills—surrounded by a mob of fighting men, as usual, and under cover. If I could have got a shot at him then, I wouldn't have bothered to deliver your note. But this is as good a time as any."

Again the flames leaped up in the black eyes and sweat beaded Afdal Khan's swarthy skin.

"You're not going to kill him in cold blood?" Willoughby protested.

"No. I'll give him a better chance than he gave Yusef Khan."

Gordon stepped to the silent Pathan, pressed his muzzle against his ribs and drew a knife and revolver from Afdal Khan's girdle. He tossed the weapons up among the rocks and sheathed his own pistol. Then he drew his tulwar with a soft rasp of steel against leather. When he spoke his voice was calm, but Willoughby saw the veins knot and swell on his temples.

"Pick up your blade, Afdal Khan. There is no one

here save the Englishman, you, I and Allah—and Allah hates swine!’’

Afdal Khan snarled like a trapped panther; he bent his knees, reaching one hand toward the weapon—he crouched there motionless for an instant eyeing Gordon with a wide, blank glare—then all in one motion he snatched up the tulwar and came like a Himalayan hill gust.

Willoughby caught his breath at the blinding ferocity of that onslaught. It seemed to him that Afdal’s hand hardly touched the hilt before he was hacking at Gordon’s head. But Gordon’s head was not there. And Willoughby, expecting to see the American overwhelmed in the storm of steel that played about him began to recall tales he had heard of El Borak’s prowess with the heavy, curved Himalayan blade.

Afdal Khan was taller and heavier than Gordon, and he was as quick as a famished wolf. He rained blow on blow with all the strength of his corded arm, and so swiftly Willoughby could follow the strokes only by the incessant clangor of steel on steel. But that flashing tulwar did not connect; each murderous blow rang on Gordon’s blade or swished past his head as he shifted. Not that the American fought a running fight. Afdal Khan moved about much more than did Gordon. The Orakzai swayed and bent his body agilely to right and left, leaped in and out, and circled his antagonist, smiting incessantly.

Gordon moved his head frequently to avoid blows, but he seldom shifted his feet except to keep his enemy always in front of him. His stance was as firm as that of a deep-rooted rock, and his blade was never beaten down. Beneath the heaviest blows the Pathan could deal it opposed an unyielding guard.

The man’s wrist and forearm must be made of iron, thought Willoughby, staring in amazement. Afdal Khan beat on El Borak’s tulwar like a smith on an

anvil, striving to beat the American to his knee by the sheer weight of his attack; cords of muscle stood out on Gordon's wrist as he met the attack. He did not give back a foot. His guard never weakened.

Afdal Khan was panting and perspiration streamed down his dark face. His eyes held the glare of a wild beast. Gordon was not even breathing hard. He seemed utterly unaffected by the tempest beating upon him. And desperation flooded Afdal Khan's face, as he felt his own strength waning beneath his maddened efforts to beat down that iron guard.

"Dog!" he gasped, spat in Gordon's face and lunged in terrifically, staking all on one stroke, and throwing his sword arm far back before he swung his tulwar in an arc that might have felled an oak.

Then Gordon moved and the speed of his shift would have shamed a wounded catamount. Willoughby could not follow his motion—he only saw that Afdal Khan's mighty swipe had cleft only empty air, and Gordon's blade was a blinding flicker in the rising sun. There was a sound as of a cleaver sundering a joint of beef and Afdal Khan staggered. Gordon stepped back with a low laugh, merciless as the ring of flint, and a thread of crimson wandered down the broad blade in his hand.

Afdal Khan's face was livid; he swayed drunkenly on his feet, his eyes dilated; his left hand was pressed to his side, and blood spouted between the fingers; his right arm fought to raise the tulwar that had become an imponderable weight.

"Allah!" he croaked. "Allah—" Suddenly his knees bent and he fell as a tree falls.

Willoughby bent over him in awe.

"Good heavens, he's shorn half asunder! How could a man live even those few seconds, with a wound like that?"

"Hillmen are hard to kill," Gordon answered, shaking the red drops from his blade. The crimson glare

had gone out of his eyes; the fire that had for so long burned consumingly in his soul had been quenched at last, though it had been quenched in blood.

"You can go back to Kabul and tell the Amir the feud's over," he said. "The caravans from Persia will soon be passing over the road again."

"What about Baber Ali?"

"He pulled out last night, after his attack on the Castle failed. I saw him riding out of the valley with most of his men. He was sick of the siege. Afdal's men are still in the valley but they'll leg it for Khoruk as soon as they hear what's happened to Afdal. The Amir will make an outlaw out of Baber Ali as soon as you get back to Kabul. I've got no more to fear from the Khoruk clan; they'll be glad to agree to peace."

Willoughby glanced down at the dead man. The feud had ended as Gordon had sworn it would. Gordon had been in the right all along; but it was a new and not too pleasing experience to Willoughby to be used as a pawn in a game—as he himself had used so many men and women.

He laughed wryly. "Confound you, Gordon, you've bamboozled me all the way through! You let me believe that only Baber Ali was besieging us, and that Afdal Khan would protect me against his uncle! You set a trap to catch Afdal Khan, and you used me as bait! I've got an idea that if I hadn't thought of that letter-and-telescope combination, you'd have suggested it yourself."

"I'll give you an escort to Ghazrael when the rest of the Orakzai clear out," offered Gordon.

"Damn it, man, if you hadn't saved my life so often in the past forty-eight hours, I'd be inclined to use bad language! But Afdal Khan was a rogue and deserved what he got. I can't say that I relish your methods, but they're effective! You ought to be in the secret service. A few years at this rate and you'll be Amir of Afghanistan!"





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Here is Glenn Lord's wonderful collection of Howardiana from the 18 issues of *The Howard Collector*. Appearing over the last decade, this much-sought-after publication has presented a wealth of material, both by Robert E. Howard and about him. Mr. Lord has assembled a massive selection of these works in this anthology. This, too, will be published in a limited edition, illustrated with art and photos. Dust-jacket by Stephen Fabian. \$13.50

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